The majority of readings this week dealt with broad framing questions aimed at defining the atmosphere surrounding the rise of dynastic Egypt. Kahl, in “Hieroglyphic Writing During the Fourth Millennium BC: an Analysis of Systems,” was no different in this regard. During the entire article the exact nature of what constitutes a writing system is in question. However, unlike many of the other authors this week, even those who dealt with similar issues early hieroglyphic writing did not deal with evidence in the same manner that Kahl did.

Kahl clearly divides his article into eight sections, each one providing more evidence to the reader in an attempt to outline a greater narrative for the development of hieroglyphic writing. He begins with an overview of the history of research and the questions at issue: (1) How early did a hieroglyphic writing system develop? (2) What stages of development are discernable in its early history? (104). Afterward, he outlines predynastic chronology, looking at both Dreyer’s reconstruction and then constructing his own.

In his third section, he outlines different writing materials, both the background substrate and medium. The table on page 107 uses evidence to show the distinction between background substrate (pottery, ivory label, stone, ect.) and medium (ink, incision, relief). From this evidence he makes the claim that relief was limited to prestigious objects. In the fourth section, he highlights literacy and maps (Fig 5, 6, 7, and 8) distributions of inscriptions from kings from Dynasty 0 and 1. From this evidence he suggests that Abydos was the ‘center’ of the distribution. He also outlines reasons why to not underestimate the number of literates: (1) If label in tomb U-j relate to place names it could indicate literacy in those places, (2) signs show enough distinction to indicate they were products of multiple scribes (111). The latter disproves the hypothesis that one individual invented the writing system.

The fifth section discusses irregularities in word spellings. Kahl suggests that scribes “took a certain pleasure in experimenting” and that a canon of symbols was still relatively incomplete (114). Further, he uses Nar-mer’s name as evidence for alternative writings being relational to the medium on which they were imprinted (Fig. 13). Next, the sixth section delves linguistically into the different components of hieroglyphic writing and uses predynastic evidence (tomb U-j, ect.) to trace their development. He looks at phonetic complements, biconsonantal phonograms, monoconsonantal phonograms, determinatives, and logograms.

In section seven, Kahl focuses on the evidence that predates Tomb U-j. He concludes that that these signs can be attributed as logograms. Finally, he concludes the article with his narrative development of the hieroglyphic writing system. From his evidence and arguments presented in the previous sections he believes that a lack of evidence on a perishable medium clouds the picture of development. In this medium, it could be possible that a more developed form of writing existed before U-j. However, based on the evidence provided, Kahl believes that it was only “during the reign of Sekhen/Ka that all the functions of hieroglyphic were attested for the first time and that only in the time of Den is the syllabary basically complete” (124).

As we discussed previously in class, there are drawbacks in trying to fit history into a neatly carved narrative. However, what I commend Kahl for doing is using the evidence to visually support the accusations he makes, something none of the other authors did to the same degree this week. I did have some issues with some of the questions he asked in tackling the material however. As I cannot treat all of them, I will discuss just a few. While he acknowledges the difficulty of defining what a writing system is, he contradicts this assumption and attempts to classify the development of hieroglyphic writing in terms of logical incremental steps that eventually constitute ‘writing’. For example, he asks “when the stock hieroglyphic signs first began to be freed from their specifically iconic or symbolic usage and thereby became abstracted from their original associations so that they could be used in different semantic contexts” (105). Would it be more useful to deconstruct what writing is and rather just look at the context and evidence rather than trying to impose moments when the language could result in the writing of all thinkable words? Also, I was not wholly convinced when Kahl made the argument that Abydos was the center of literacy. I wish we would have treated this section with more context to the inscriptions found in other locations and how they related to the development of what was being seen in Abydos at that time.

The article ties in nicely with the other ones this week in its specific treatment of writing as just once piece of state formation (although that is not the specific aim of this article). I would like to see and explore how using some of the arguments posed by other authors could also influence the way in which we look at this evidence. For example, Bard suggests that the increasing exchange and integration between economic entities caused for the rise of a complex society in predynastic Egypt. How do these economic exchanges link with the development of writing? Kahl disproves a single creator hypothesis for the language and suggests many influences. Could a similar process be going on? How is trade linked with the development of writing? Also, Kahl talks briefly about social hierarchy in relation to writing (medium for example). In a similar vein, even though other authors briefly discussed this, are similar processes of the evolution of social hierarchy going on with writing as they are with grave size? While, many of these questions may only be answerable with more evidence, I believe they pose pertinent connections and illuminate themes presented by the other authors.