

The Egyptians called them "the words of the god" and the Greeks later translated this phrase as "the sacred carvings", or hieroglyphics. This system of writing appears to be the world's second oldest, yielding first place to the cuneiform writing of the Sumerians. Hieroglyphics were written in Egypt from c. 3000 B.C. to c. 400 A.D., making this system the longest used manner of writing in antiquity. For about 1500 years after the last hieroglyphic inscription was written, men were ignorant of its decipherment, and not until 1822 was a Frenchman named Champollion able to unlock the mysteries of this highly artistic writing, using an inscription written in Hieroglyphics, Hieratic and Greek as his key. Hieroglyphics were the most sacred of Egypt's writing systems, and were used both as information and decoration; hieratic and demotic were the cursive, less formal manners of writing which the priests and scribes used for more transitory and mundane matters. Both hieratic and demotic were derived from hieroglyphics.

Hieroglyphics can in themselves tell us an immense amount about the ancient dwellers in the Nile Valley. For one thing, a highly complex society can be seen on the pylons and tombs of Egypt even by the illiterate, who can easily recognize various birds, snakes, snails, mammals, grains, insects, household utensils, figures and parts of human beings. Until Champollion, many thought the signs were mystic cult signs with no sound, or phonogram, value. Once interpreted, it became clear that a rich and poetic language lay beneath the superficial beauty.












The signs of hieroglyphics are mostly phonograms or sound signs. Classical Egyptian used no vowels; these were only introduced later to express foreign names. The sounds, then, were single or multiple consonants, with the vowels supplied by recognition of the entire word by the reader. Egyptian had uniconsonantal signs (signs that had only one sound), biconsonantal signs (two sounds), and even tri-consonantal signs (three sounds). To add to the confusion, there were homograms, i.e., different signs which made the same sound. Some 600 hieroglyphic sound, or phonetic, signs existed to plague the young student who had steeled himself "to learn the difficult scribal art".

There existed, as well, about 100 more signs which did not have a sound value, but were interpreted as actual pictures. These are called ideograms. Thus, after spelling out the word for the "sun", an actual picture of the sun might be drawn after the word to represent the physical object. Some ideograms were used as determinatives, or signs to clarify the intention of the word. For instance, the sign of the sparrow had no sound value, but always indicated that something was wrong, sad, nasty or depressing, probably because sparrows ate the peasants' grain and were a general pest. Only a practiced eye could tell a phonogram from an ideogram, but remember - most Egyptians were illiterate, and hieroglyphics were not for mass communication, but for the elite and for the gods.

Even when spelling out a word, a scribe strove for as much clarity as possible with his ungainly but beautiful hieroglyphs. When writing out the word "beautiful", "nefer" or "nFr", he might choose to add an extra "r" to the spelling ("nFrr") just to make sure you had the right idea, though this had no effect on pronunciation at all. When indicating plurals he might repeat the entire word three times, or more conveniently, add three vertical strokes below the word. The Egyptians as a people never did agree on a single spelling for all their words, just as they never worked out a consistent mythology. They were content with a rich variety of signs and stories, and saw no need to reduce everything to a rational unity as we might have desired. The Egyptians never even systematized the direction in which they

read and wrote, for hieroglyphs could go in vertical columns, read from the top down, or in horizontal columns, read either left to right or right to left, depending on which way the living creatures in the line faced. They usually faced toward the starting point.

It is no wonder, then, that Egyptian school boys laboured mightily under the stinging tongue and strap of their instructors to learn how to skillfully and artistically handle the "gods' words". Nevertheless the rewards were equal to the sweat, and the men who controlled Egypt were, by and large, those who had proved their mastery over the written word.

| UNILITERALS | | | | BILITERALS | | | | TRILITERALS | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Quail chick | Loaf | Bolt | Twisted flax | Face | Milk jug (in a net) | Goose | Swallow or martin | Beetle or scarab | Sandal strap | Heart and windpipe |
| w | t | s | h | hr | me | sa | wr | kheper | ankh | nefer |

PHONOGRAMS










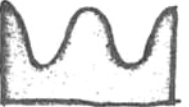


PTOLEMY'S CARTOUCHE



CLEOPATRA'S CARTOUCHE

DETERMINATIVES

| Weep | Man, Son | Cattle, Ox | Beer pot, Drunkenness | Bee, Honey |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Nesting | Jubilation | Sail upstream | Woman, Widow | Hill country, Desert |