

# Egyptian Hieroglyphs

## History

The Egyptian hieroglyphic script began about 5,000 years ago in the northeast corner of Africa. Like most cultures that are just beginning to invent a writing system, the ancient Egyptians used pictures to write their language. Eventually the symbols came to represent sounds.

Herodotus, a Greek historian (c. 484 BC – c. 425 BC), believed that Egyptian hieroglyphs to be sacred due to their pictorial elegance, so he and other important Greeks of the time referred to them as “holy writing.” Thus, the word hieroglyph is from the Greek *hieros* “holy” and *glypho* “writing.”

In ancient Egyptian language, hieroglyphs were called *medu neter*, “the gods’ words” as it was believed that writing was an invention of the gods. More specifically, credited to the god Thoth.

Use of hieroglyphics continued until 400 AD. After that, the language was written in the Greek alphabet with several extra letters added for Egyptian sounds that did not exist in Greek. This latter form of Egyptian is referred to as “Coptic.” Eventually the Coptic language was replaced by Arabic, the official language of Egypt today.

## How are we able to read Egyptian hieroglyphs today?

In the 1820s CE, Frenchman Jean-François Champollion famously deciphered hieroglyphs using the 2nd century BCE Rosetta Stone with its triple text of Hieroglyphic (suitable for priests), Demotic (the native Egyptian script) and Greek (the language of administration, as the rulers of Egypt at this point were Greco-Macedonian due to Alexander the Great’s conquest).



## In Depth

Hieroglyphic script is composed of three basic types of signs.

- 1) **Logograms** represent words and concepts. For example (on the right), the symbol for “sun” also means “day” and “light,” a modern day association is the usage of emojis!




- 2) **Phonograms** represent sounds. Using phonograms, scribes would spell out words which were not represented by their own ideogram. The two hieroglyphs taken together, have a whole new meaning.

For example, to write the word *bew* which meant “place” in middle Egyptian, Scribes used  (b) and  (w).

3) **Determinatives** indicate the end of individual words and provides further information that serve to clarify.



These two logograms could be used to represent a mouth and an arm individually, but here, together they are used as phonograms, spelling out the word *re* (also known as *ra*) which means sun. To add further clarification, the determinative  (king or god) is added, the word *sun* doesn't change, but this new addition changes the meaning from simply “sun” to the *sun god ra*, rather than the sun itself!



As a result of all of this, the number of signs used by the Egyptians was much higher compared to other alphabetical systems, with over a thousand different hieroglyphs in use initially and later reduced to about 750 during the Middle Kingdom (2055-1650 BCE).

Furthermore, twenty-four hieroglyphs represent the single sounds found in the Egyptian language. These hieroglyphs are used similar to letters of the alphabet (for example: English and Arabic).

### Which directions are Egyptian hieroglyphs read?

Unlike the letters in the English alphabet, Egyptian hieroglyphs can be read in more than one direction. Left to right as found in English and Right to Left as found in Arabic or Hebrew. Or in columns from top to bottom as done in Chinese.

You can tell which way hieroglyphs are supposed to be read by looking at the animals, plants and people. If they face left, starts reading from the left. If they are facing right, begin at the right.

Hieroglyphs referring to a person face the same direction as the person. When Hieroglyphs are part of a scene that involves more than one person, the direction the hieroglyphs face tells which words refer to which person.





Example:







All the hieroglyphs above are facing right, therefore, they should be read from right to left.

Furthermore, if images are stacked in a column, always read the top image first. As a final note to remember, temples are more likely to have columns and official documents are written in rows.

## Sounding It Out

The Egyptians used the same hieroglyph  for **f** and **v**. The sound for this hieroglyph is **f**. The same process follows for **r** and **l**, they are represented by the hieroglyph ; the sound for this is **r**. Another sound is the English **th** and the Arabic **ث**. For nuance, two hieroglyphs can be used:  (t) +  (h).

However, there are some sounds that exist in other languages that had hieroglyphic equivalences.

Hieroglyph	Non-English Sound
	Like the Arabic letter ع, 'ain; a sound made at the back of the throat
	An emphatic <b>h</b> . As in <i>ḥā!</i>
	Guttural <b>ch</b> , found in the Scottish word <b>loch</b> or the Arabic letter ح, this sound is something written as <b>kh</b> in English
	Like the Arabic letter ق, <i>kāf</i> , a k sounds made at the back of the throat

## Keeping up with Gods, Goddesses and Royalty

A **cartouche** is an ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic name plate, shaped like an oval with a horizontal bar at the base of the oval and a king's name written inside of the oval. The name is actually French and a result of French soldiers, on an expedition led by Napoleon, who observed that the symbol they saw so frequently repeated on pharaonic ruins they encountered resembled a muzzle-loading firearm's paper powder cartridge.



The ancient Egyptian cartouche represented a looped rope, which was believed to have the magical power to protect the name written inside of it from evil spirits both in life and the afterlife. Names can be arranged inside the cartouche both horizontally and vertically, usually depending on best layouts for a design.

**Example:** Cartouche with the Birth Name of the female Pharaoh Hatshepsut



## Sources

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