

7. EGYPTIAN HIEROGLYPHIC WRITING

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Egyptian is an Afroasiatic language that is distantly related to Semitic languages (e.g., Arabic, Hebrew, Akkadian) and many African languages (e.g., Berber, Cushitic, Chadic). Egyptian shares many things with these languages. One shared trait had a major influence on the Egyptian writing system — the root system. Most words consist of two or three consonants; the vowels changed depending on the form of the word being used (noun vs. verb, singular vs. plural, past tense vs. present tense, etc.). This led to use of a writing system that (like Arabic and Hebrew) wrote only the consonants, which were consistent among all the forms of the word, not the vowels, which changed from form to form (a native speaker of the language would have known which vowels to use with which forms, so there would not have been any confusion).

The earliest Egyptian writing may have written words by drawing a picture of the item involved. Each hieroglyph is a picture of a real object from daily life. But it is impossible to write some words in such a system (how do you draw a picture of “love” or “faith” as opposed to “man” or “house”?), and it is very hard to write complete sentences. Thus, the Egyptians employed the rebus principle: One can write a word using a picture of something that has the same sound. A classic example in English is drawing a (honey)bee followed by a leaf from a tree to write the word “belief.” Thus, in Egyptian, a picture of a mouth  (phonetic *r*) could be used to write the preposition “to, at, against” (also phonetic *r*), or the floor plan of a simple house  (phonetic *pr*) could be used to write the verb “to go (up)” (also phonetic *pr*). Since, as noted, the consontal root was so important in Egyptian, only the consonants needed to be the same, not the vowels, for one picture to represent an unrelated word. Thus, many signs developed a phonetic meaning/usage derived from, but distinct from, their pictorial meaning. Such phonograms may represent one (e.g., *r*), two (e.g., *pr*), or three consonants. (Such phonograms are frequently referred to as uniliteral, biliteral, and triliteral signs; fig. 7.1.) The Egyptians

biliterals	 <i>k3</i>	 <i>šw</i>	 <i>šn</i>
trilaterals	 <i>dpt</i>	 <i>fnd</i>	 <i>hwt</i>

FIGURE 7.1. Examples of individual hieroglyphs that convey two or three consonants (biliterals and trilaterals)

did develop what modern scholars refer to as an alphabet, a group of twenty-four uniliteral phonetic signs representing each letter of the Egyptian phonetic inventory (see table 9.2 below). But the classic Egyptian scripts, based on hieroglyphs, never restricted themselves to using only alphabetic, or even only phonetic, signs. Rather, the writing system used a combination of both ideograms (or logograms) (e.g.,  as “mouth” or  as “house”) and phonograms (e.g.,  for the sound/letter *r* or  for the sound/letter combination *pr*) in combination with what modern scholars call “determinatives” (or semagrams) — signs used to indicate the general category to which a word belongs (e.g.,  used as a “determinative” after many words indicating types of structures, from huts to palaces). Biliteral and triliteral signs were frequently accompanied by one or more uniliteral “phonetic complements” reiterating the phonetic structure of the word. For example,  *pr* “to go (up)” uses the biliteral *pr* followed by a uniliteral phonetic complement *r* and a “walking legs” determinative indicating that this word is a verb indicating motion or movement. When a sign was being used with its logographic meaning (and without phonetic complements), it was normally accompanied by a stroke (e.g.,  | “house”) where the stroke said “take me literally.” Although in theory every hieroglyphic sign could be used in all of these ways, in actuality *pr* is one of the few which is so used regularly; most signs were restricted to one or two of the three functions of logogram, phonogram, determinative.

The earliest and most characteristic Egyptian script is hieroglyphs, a term derived from the Greek ἱερογλυφική “of sacred carving,” reflecting the use of hieroglyphs on temple and tomb walls, stelae, statues, and other monumental inscriptions. The Egyptians themselves referred to this script as *mdw nṯr* “words of the god,” believing that the god Thoth invented writing (see 5. *The Conception and Development of the Egyptian Writing System*, this volume). Other scripts described as “hieroglyphic” are known, among them Luwian, Chinese, and Mayan (see 13. *Anatolian Hieroglyphic Writing*, 14. *The Beginnings of Writing in China*, and 15. *The Development of Maya Writing*, this volume), but the systems are completely unrelated, and they developed in isolation from each other. The earliest hieroglyphic texts appear about 3320 BC; the latest dated hieroglyphic inscription comes from AD 394. The brief texts from the predynastic Tomb U-j at Abydos already employ signs for

their phonetic values. For example, a tag (see fig. 6.4) is marked with a bird (known from later periods to have the phonetic value *bj*) and the chair/throne sign (phonetic *st*); this combination has been interpreted as the writing of the geographic location Bubastis (*Bj-st*). The complexity of the earliest texts has led some scholars to propose that Egyptian was the result of a “single invention” rather than a gradual development (Parkinson 1999, p. 73). Others, however, assume that the earlier stages of the script have simply not survived.

Egyptian hieroglyphs were, as noted, used in monumental and ceremonial contexts, including religious papyri and tomb furnishings. Hieroglyphs served as part of the decoration of such monuments and could be written in columns or rows and could face either right or left (the front of the hieroglyph would point toward the beginning of the inscription). This flexibility is especially noticeable on doorways where an inscription may start in the middle over the doorway and flow out and down in both directions (fig. 7.2). An inscription accompanying a human being or deity would face in the same direction as the human or deity. There is no space left between words or sentences, although the determinatives found at the end of most words do effectively mark word boundaries. Signs were arranged in square or rectangular groups rather than simply being strung out one after the other (e.g.,  where the *pr*-sign is written over the *r*); signs are read from top to bottom and from front to back. The placement of individual signs may be transposed for aesthetic reasons (to avoid gaps) or for honorific reasons. For example, in personal names that incorporate the name of a god, the divine name may be written before the other phonetic elements (fig. 7.3). The interaction between

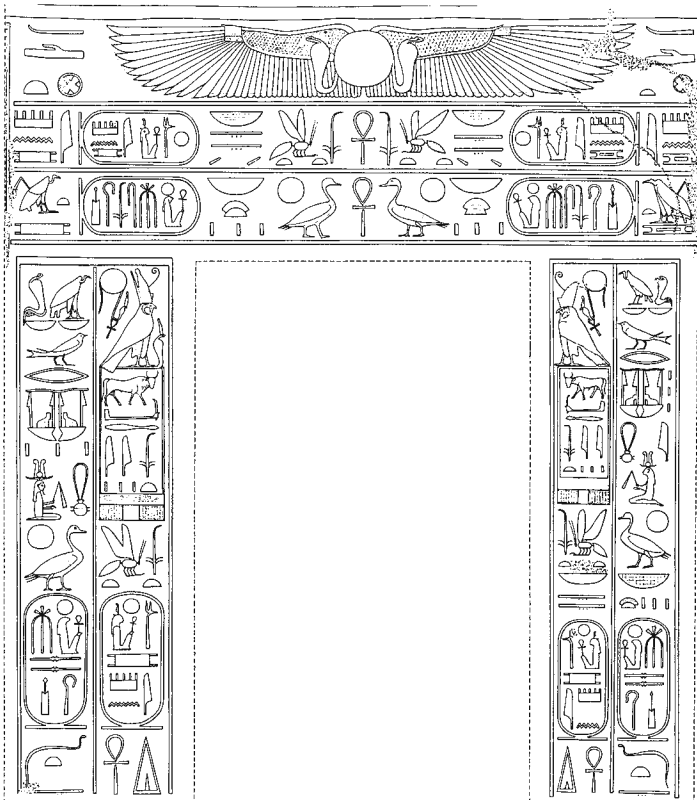


FIGURE 7.2. Doorway at the temple of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu decorated with hieroglyphic texts. The text on the lintel reads right and left from the central *ankh*-sign. The texts on the left jamb read from right to left, those on the right from left to right. The different orientation of the signs created a symmetrical composition

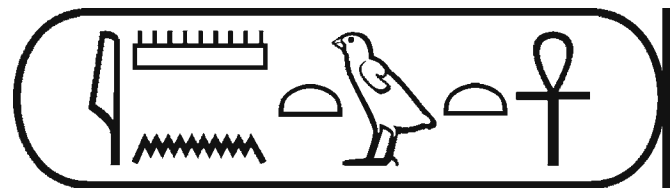


FIGURE 7.3. Cartouche (name ring) of King Tutankhamun to be read from left to right. The name is written *Imn twt ankh* because the name of the god Amun (*Imn*) has been honorifically placed first. However, the grammatical structure of the name, which means “Living Image of Amun,” indicates that the name was read Tut-ankh-Amun

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word and picture in the hieroglyphic system is highlighted by the occasional mutilation of signs of dangerous animals, etc., in tomb inscriptions (see figure on page 156, below).

There were several hundred signs in regular use until the Ptolemaic period (fourth–first century BC), when a large number of new signs were developed. Most signs appear in their classic shape already in the Old Kingdom and show little modification in their form through time. Because hieroglyphs can be elaborate images that are time-consuming to execute (fig. 7.4), the more cursive, and more rapidly written hieratic and Demotic scripts were usually used for economic, legal, and administrative documents, literary texts, and letters.



FIGURE 7.4. Highly detailed hieroglyph in the form of an owl that has the phonetic value *m*