

The Writing and Language of Ancient Egypt*

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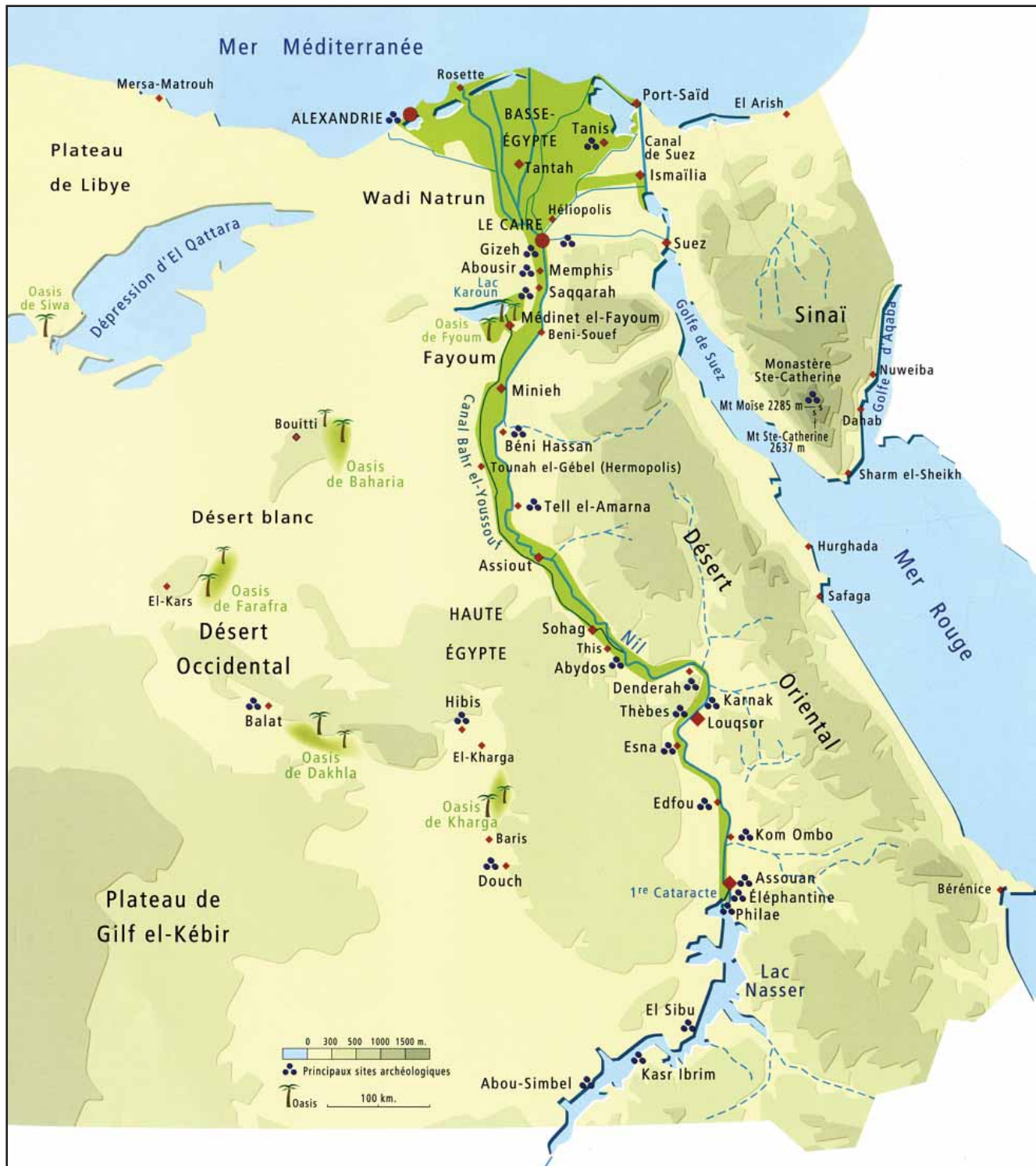
The civilization of Ancient Egypt existed between around 5500 BCE and 30 BCE. It occupied the area of the valley and Delta of the River Nile northward from its First Cataract in the north-east corner of Africa. With desert to the west, east, and south and sea to the north and further east, the Nile Valley delineated the Egyptian state. The land was rich in all kinds of resources including abundant fish, birds, wild and domesticated animals, many varieties of stone in the desert quarries, and metals, especially gold, in the eastern wastelands. Most importantly there was a flood which invigorated the agricultural lands every year with fresh mud. The people of Egypt have left behind monuments and objects, many of them covered in the writing now known as Egyptian hieroglyphs. They used this pictorial writing system to write down their language and record aspects of their culture. The information from the writing tells us something about how the Egyptians governed their land and people, about their beliefs, and about their hopes and dreams. Though we can read hieroglyphs this does not mean that we know every thing there is to know about Ancient Egypt, partly because the writings have survived accidentally and so are a fraction

of the original corpus and partly because the writings only preserve those things the Egyptians themselves thought were important. They do, however, give us a point of interaction with the minds of the Ancient Egyptians. (Fig. 1)

Ancient Egyptian as an Afro-asiatic language

Ancient Egyptian is a member of the Afro-asiatic family of languages, a family to which many of the other ancient and modern languages of the Near East and of North Africa belong. The main branches of Afro-asiatic are:

1. Ancient Egyptian (with its descendant Coptic).
2. Semitic languages including ancient: Akkadian (later: Babylonian and Assyrian), Eblaite, Amorite, various Canaanite dialects (Ugaritic, Phoenician, Hebrew), Aramaic and Syriac, Ethiopic (including Ge'ez and Amharic), Arabic (Sabaeen, Safaidic, Nabataean, Himyaridic, Qur'anic Arabic); modern: Arabic (in numerous dialect forms), Amharic (and other Ethiopic languages), Hebrew.
3. (Libo-) Berber languages including: Tuaric, Shilish, Tamaric.



(Fig. 1) Map of Egypt.

4. Cushitic languages including: Bedja, Saho-Afar, Somali, Oromo.
5. Chadic languages: principally Hausa.
6. Omotic languages (disputed).

The comparative study of this language family and the study of the place of Ancient Egyptian within it is hampered by differences in knowledge of these languages: some have a long recorded history and have been studied intensively (the Semitic languages), whereas others are only now becoming well known (e.g. the Oromo languages of Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia) or have a much shorter and more scanty written tradition (the Berber languages). At present Ancient Egyptian has no known close cognate within the Afro-asiatic group (and is assigned alone to its own branch in the language family).

Although various languages have become extinct in this group (including Ancient Egyptian) and others are now spoken in areas where they previously were not (e.g. Arabic), it seems likely that these languages have been spoken very roughly in the same broad areas at least since the so-called 'agricultural revolution' and its initial spread in the millennia following the end of the last ice age. On the basis of comparative work, it seems clear that the various language-branches had been distinct for some considerable time at the dawn of their written history (c. 3000-2500 BCE). Egypt lies at the juncture of the two main geographical areas for Afro-asiatic -North Africa and the Near East- and Ancient Egyptian displays some of the lexical and grammatical properties found in its Near Eastern and/or North African neighbors. Much of the comparative work to date

has focused on establishing word correspondences ('isoglosses') between the various Afroasiatic languages, for example:

Egyptian *ink* (read '*anek*', Coptic *anok*) 'I', Oromo *ana*, Hausa *ni*, Tamazight *nekk*, Somali *aniga*, Arabic *ana*, Akkadian *anaku*, Eblaite *a(n)na*. Egyptian *xnt* 'face, front', Hausa *hancii* 'nose', Arabic *khanna* 'speak nasally'.

Examining early textual evidence

Writing in the tombs of the Early Dynastic Period at Abydos was used carefully, however, the tombs seem to be miniature versions of the houses of the kings and stored all his requirements for the afterlife. These ranged from food and clothing to oil for anointing plus imported goods worthy of a king in the afterlife, so that his royal status was apparent to the gods. It was thought vital to record the ownership of these items so that there could be no doubt of it. It was also necessary to record the quantities and provenance of the goods so that the living would know how much had been placed in the tomb and therefore removed from the real storerooms of the palace. This suggests that the tomb records would then be compared with the palace magazine records and the two tallied so that the debits from the real stores could be accounted for. The royal stores no doubt comprised goods from all the king's domains and trading contacts and each of those places must have had its own accounts recording the taxes and tributes due to the king, what was actually paid and when it was sent to the residence. The tomb is the tip of the iceberg of a huge state organization and the use of writing in it hints at the huge accounting machinery at work in the background.

It may seem less than glamorous to suggest that the invention of writing happened for taxation purposes, but whether material is recorded for the warehouse or for the afterlife, it is part of the same process. The tomb too was a focus for the display of the cult practices surrounding the dead king and was not only the means for transferring him to another sphere of existence with the ancestor gods, but provided a restricted arena for the display of his power and status. In this sphere, the tomb architecture funnels life-restoring power to the king's spirit, whose existence is assured by the presence of hieroglyphs naming him.

Label of Den from Abydos (Fig. 2)

Den was one of the first great kings of Egypt, around 2800 bc. He ruled a united kingdom centred on the capital city at Ineb-Hedj, 'White Walls' (Memphis), and his tomb at Abydos is a good guide to how much written material might have been produced at that time. At the entrance of the tomb were two monolithic stelae inscribed stone slabs bearing only the name of the king. It was written inside the *serekh*-rectangle, with a falcon representing the god Horus standing upon it. Inside are the two hieroglyphs spelling the king's name: a human hand and a zig-zag water sign. Inside the tomb many inscribed labels and jar sealings were found and they also record a second name of the king which is read either as *Khasety* or *Semty*.

Some of the labels record 'events' or 'festivals' in the reign of the king and served as a yearly account (annal) of his rule. They record the kind of living myth that is the life of a successful king. A close examination of one of Den's labels from



(Fig. 2) Label of king Den. © Trustees of the British Museum.

Abydos shows how far the use of hieroglyphs and pictures had come up to this point. The wooden label (British Museum 32.650) measures 8cm by 5.4cm and the text on it reads from right to left. At the top right of the label is the attaching hole and the tall vertical sign at the very right is a notched palm rib meaning:

'year', so this reads: 'the Year of ...'.

The scene at the top right shows a figure seated on a stepped platform inside a booth. He wears a White Crown and holds a flail of office. In front of him a figure wearing the

Double Crown of Upper and Lower Egypt and holding a flail and rod is running around two sets of hemispherical markers. The event is the Sed-festival, when the king proved his fitness and strength after a period of time in office by running around a marked course.

The scene below is less clear but seems to show a walled enclosure containing several hieroglyphs, perhaps the name of a town. To the left is what was originally interpreted as a small squatting figure of a woman with several hieroglyphs in front of her which may be her name. Behind her is a man wearing a head-dress and carrying an oar and a staff. Three hieroglyphs above him show a vessel with human legs, a bolt of cloth, and possibly a vulture sign. Behind him the two top signs spell the second name of Den and the lower sign is some sort of portable shrine. The damaged scene below contains bird, land, and plant hieroglyphs. The large area to the left contains the *serekh* bearing Den's name and to its left is a title, 'Seal bearer of the king of Lower Egypt', and the name '*Hemaka*' (written with a twisted rope, a sickle, and a pair of arms). *Hemaka* was an important and powerful official of Den.

To the left is another rectangle containing signs, of which the last one is a word meaning 'to build'. Beneath is a word meaning 'House of the King'. The hieroglyphs in the lower left part of the tablet can be recognized and mention the 'Horus Throne' and a dais. They seem to record further that the label was used on a jar of oil, perhaps recording its date of production or precise provenance. Alternatively, the oil may have been symbolically connected with the events depicted, either as

anointing oil or offering oil. The tablet records 'The year of a Sed-festival, Opening the festival of the Beautiful Doorway', and perhaps something connected with the building of the king's palace. As is clear from this part-interpretation, the signs have much information to give and act as a fully fledged writing system.

Altogether fragments of thirty-one such 'annal' labels are known from Den's tomb and they mention events such as the 'Journey of the Reput on the Lake' or 'Capture of the wild bull near Buto'. There is a clear tradition of recording events both with cultic and economic benefits. Other inscribed objects were found in Den's tomb including stelae with the names of people buried with the king, inscribed game pieces, and jar sealings. Some of them repeat 'cultic events' from the labels such as the Lower Egyptian king spearing a hippopotamus and, of course, record the name of the king. The most interesting personal object from Den's tomb was the lid of an ivory box inscribed to show that it had contained his own seal of office. There is also a hint that in cult temples the display of royal power was dependent on the integration of hieroglyphic writing and organized depictions of rituals or commemoration of events.

The most famous example from this time is the Narmer Palette (Fig. 3), apparently of Dynasty 0-1 (c.3100 bc) made of slate and decorated in raised relief. Found at Nekhen, it shows King Narmer, his name written with catfish and chisel hieroglyphs, as king of northern and southern Egyptian kingdoms. As the king of the southern Egyptian kingdom, probably centred on Nekhen, Narmer is about to brain his enemy, who is shown



(Fig. 3) Narmer Palette. Cairo Museum.

as culturally different. His death is not shown because the moment depicted is the precise second before the king acts—he can take life or give life. As the king of the northern Egyptian kingdom, perhaps centred on Nubt (Ombos), the king takes part in a victory parade surveying the decapitated bodies of his enemies and accompanied by a boy or man carrying his sandals and by a person wearing a heavy wig and leopard-skin garment. The figure is either his chief minister or a high-ranking priest. Though palettes were used to grind down pigments for use as bodily adornment, the size of

this palette, its decoration, and the hieroglyphs on it suggest it was meant for display in processions or in the sanctuary of the temple to Horus at Nekhen. It commemorated the acts of Narmer and his devotion to the god Horus.

Seal impressions are in themselves important as a means of easy replication of written signs, for one seal would be used to create a large number of impressions. Some of these early seals have survived in the form of a cylinder made of stone or wood (Fig. 4). The ‘cylinder seal’ had a hole through the centre and the outside of the cylinder was incised



(Fig. 4) Cylinder seal. Cairo Museum.

in sunk relief with the writing, usually of the king's name or other words or a scene. When a string or stick was put through the hole it could be rolled over wet clay or mud and the impression of the seal would be left standing proud on the surface of the mud. Though this is a typical method of sealing jars in early Egypt, the cylinder seal was probably a Mesopotamian invention. The fact that the Egyptians adopted the cylinder seal has led to the suggestion that the idea of writing, and of writing in pictures (hieroglyphs) in particular, originated in Mesopotamia.

Stimulus and rule

In the case of Den's tomb, writing was used to name and identify, to keep accounts and to record specific cultic events pertaining to the king. The commemoration of these basic records achieved a cultic status of which

the Early Dynastic tombs and early Dynastic temple deposits are our only archaeological evidence. It is likely that they only refer to the rather rarefied elite sphere and record their concerns. The impression given is that in the valley and Delta settlements writing was used more rarely for royal commemoration. This cannot possibly be the case for every place, however, and the main administrative centres of Egypt will have had written documents of many types which have not survived. Indeed the success of the Egyptian state was based on the mass organization of agricultural surplus, so that it could be used to feed those who worked on non-agricultural projects for the king such as craftsmen, bureaucrats, the army, and members of quarry expeditions and the royal court.

The year's planning was based on one particular astronomical event. At the moment

the flood began, the star Sirius was first visible from Egypt after a seventy-day absence. This coincidence signalled the beginning of the whole administrative year and it was all recorded. The timing of the rising of Sinus—the goddess Sopdet in Egypt—and especially the height of the flood were meticulously recorded and cross-checked. The flood began around mid-July, covered the Nile Valley and delta for about three months, and then receded. The ideal height was about 20 cubits (10m) at Aswan, 12 cubits (6m) near Cairo, and about 7 cubits in the delta (3.5m). If this were exceeded settlements and farms could be destroyed, but if the flood fell short, not enough land would be flooded or water brought to produce the required food and surpluses. The southernmost part of Egypt at Aswan was therefore one of the key points in the country for measuring the flood height. As soon as the king's officials knew the height of the flood, they could calculate from their past records in the archives how much tax could be collected and therefore what kind of projects could be sustained for the glory of the king. This fiscal yield was broken down into units so that by the time the flood began to recede about three months later the scribes could be on hand to mark out the exact amount of land and inform farmers of their expected yields. From that first sign of the flood at Aswan a king would know what building projects he could afford, how many artisans and specialists he could usefully put to work, and perhaps how many foreign campaigns he could undertake. At times of low floods, the king would know that he needed to husband his resources wisely and perhaps scale down his building works and temple donations.

All of this was made possible by careful record-taking and accessible archives. The ideological reasons for the development of writing were concerned with recording this information to establish the status of the king in this life, in the next, and in the realm of the gods.

Hieroglyphic Script and Egyptian Language

Language is an evolving and constantly changing system. New words are created, old ones go out of use, meanings and pronunciations of words change, the structure of words alters, and the very grammatical framework of language evolves. It was the same for Egyptian and both the spoken language and the script used to record it in the Early Dynastic phase had over three thousand years of development ahead of it. The rise of the unified state in Egypt must have prompted development of a writing system to make accurate records for the benefit of the king and his court. Legend has it that the first king of Egypt, Menes 'The Founder', established the capital city at Memphis, at the apex of the Delta, and that this was the administrative centre of the kingdom. It is no accident that the patron god of Memphis is the craftsman Ptah, who was believed to have created the world by thinking of the names of things. When he uttered those names, so giving form to thought, they came into existence.

Writing is one of the ways of creating and recording ideas in a concrete form. The scribes and bureaucrats working at Memphis passed on their knowledge to their sons and laid the foundations for an elite class of literate bureaucrats. From the very beginning there was a difference between

the hieroglyphic script and the cursive and linear hieratic scripts used in everyday life which would have been much more usual and more widely known. The Egyptian word for their pictorial writing was ‘*medu-netjer*’, which means ‘words of god’, and it seems that this was recognized as the primary function of the hieroglyphic script: to communicate between Egyptians and their gods. This was possible in the buildings mainly associated with the gods, their temples, and in places where the divine world touched the earthly world—that is, in tombs and cemeteries. In addition, as the king was regarded as the intermediary between people and the gods, almost anything official or monumental relating to the king had to be written in hieroglyphic script.

The drawing or carving of the pictorial hieroglyphs was a time-consuming process and if scribes had had to paint in every feather in every bird-sign it necessarily would have taken a great deal of time. Formal hieroglyphic writing was not a very efficient use of scribal time and so to speed up the writing process they had developed. The language written in this script is no different from that written in hieroglyphs and the scripts continue to be used in parallel with each other. It would be the difference between writing something in ‘illuminated’ letters like those in the in Koranic calligraphy and writing something in ‘real’ (joined-up) writing. (Fig. 5)

In general, the more monumental a text temple, tomb, stelae then the more likely that it will be written in hieroglyphs. Egyptian is thus a dual creature in two ways: language and script; and hieroglyph and hieratic. The Egyptian used



(Fig. 5) Colored ‘illuminated’ hieroglyphs. Tomb of Ramses IV.

in monuments had formal restrictions about how it sounded and was used, and particularly later on it must have sounded archaic and somewhat artificial. Whenever this kind of Egyptian was spoken or written it may have immediately implied a formal type of communication with the divine sphere. Monumental hieroglyphic Egyptian is an extremely high-status language.

Phonetic (sound) signs

There was not a true Egyptian ‘alphabet’ as we know it, but Egyptologists have devised an

alphabet of a kind and this is used as a starting place in learning Egyptian hieroglyphs. The order of the signs is a modern, linguistic order and the list includes a number of sounds which are not heard in the pronunciation of the English language. It is very close to the claim of the Greek writer Plutarch that there were twenty-five consonants in Egyptian. All of the signs in this list are a single consonantal sound and they are written as if the text in which they occur is read from left to right. At the beginning of the list are sounds which are classed as vowels in English but in Egyptian are consonants (basic element of speech). They are followed by sounds made with the lips (labial), palate, tongue, or throat and can be made with force or simply breathed. This is not a classification the Egyptians used. It is purely an artificial phonetic order for the convenience of modern students of the language and represents the monoconsonants (one sound) of the Egyptians.

As Middle Egyptian has about seven hundred signs altogether and this list is of twenty-four signs it is obvious that the other signs used by the Egyptians represent other types of sound and also that they are used to represent ideas.

Sound and meaning signs: ideograms

This group of signs are almost like real picture writing as they represent the thing they depict and have the relevant sound value: pr house, ib heart. A vertical stroke is written under such signs when used as a word to show that this is the case and that they are not purely sound signs. Determinatives Each word in Egyptian contains a number of these signs which can have different purposes in the word. The word

for 'cat' can be written: . The signs used to write this word are performing different roles within this one word. The first three signs are all phonetic signs to tell the reader how the word is pronounced. The first sign, a milk bottle with a string tied around it, is the biconsonantal mi recording two sounds and sounding something like 'mee'. The second sign, a reed, has the one-sound value 'ee' and so adds to the mi and acts as a phonetic complement. The third sign, a quail chick, is another one-sound sign with the value w and the sound 'oo'. These three signs give the word the sounds 'mee-oo' and this is the onomatopoeic word for 'cat'. The fourth and final sign has a different role to play. This is an image of a seated cat, its tail curling up onto its back, as occurs in real life and in so many bronze statuettes of cats.

The sign 'determines' the meaning of the whole word but it does not have a sound value. For nouns (the names of things), these determinatives are very useful in showing where one word ends and another begins, especially as Egyptian has no punctuation, except perhaps for the dots written above lines of New Kingdom poetry written in hieratic. For verbs (words which describe actions) there is another set of determinatives which reflect the type of action described. For instance, the Papyrus roll. (Fig 6)

The determinative is a piece of papyrus, rolled up and tied with string. As papyri contain writings and knowledge, the use of the determinative seems reasonably clear. This sign is a common determinative in words where it can be difficult to see the rationale for its use and it may in fact be used for much more abstract concepts. The



(Fig. 6) An example of determinative.

determinative is therefore a kind of useful catch-all sign, as for example in *Htp* ‘hetep’, be pleased, satisfied. Determinatives have a much more important role than just being word-endings for they affect the whole meaning of a word and can lend subtle (or not) extra meanings to words depending upon the context in which they are used.

The Stages of Ancient Egyptian Language

A summary of the development of Ancient Egyptian Language may be useful before this development is discussed in more detail:

Period	language phase	Scripts
Old Kingdom c. 2700-2100 BC	Old Egyptian	Hieroglyphic, Hieratic
Middle Kingdom c. 2000-1700 BC	Middle Egyptian	Hieroglyphic, Hieratic, cursive hieroglyphs
New Kingdom c. 1500-1000 BC	Late Egyptian New Kingdom Middle Egyptian	Hieroglyphic, Hieratic, cursive hieroglyphs
Late Period c. 700BC-300 AD	Demotic language Late Period Middle Egyptian	Hieroglyphic, Hieratic, abnormal hieratic Demotic script
Christian/Islamic Period c. 300AD-1600AD	Coptic	Coptic alphabet

Old Egyptian

Our knowledge of Ancient Egyptian is intimately bound up with the development of writing in Ancient Egypt (and the purposes for which writing was employed). The earliest surviving inscriptions from Ancient Egypt date to the end of the predynastic period (Naqada III). However, these inscriptions and those of the Archaic period (dynasties I-II) are in general brief and disconnected, and often too obscure, to yield a ‘grammar’ of Egyptian at this time. It is only with the development of the more connected funerary inscriptions in the early Old Kingdom in dynasties III and IV, which are still fairly limited and conventional in content, that we begin to be able to isolate the *Old Egyptian* phase of the language. Even so, the bulk of our knowledge of *Old Egyptian* comes from the later Old Kingdom (dynasties V and VI, stretching down into the First Intermediate Period). The principal sources

are:

- a) *royal monumental hieroglyphic inscriptions (including funerary texts)*: principally the Pyramid Texts inscribed in the burial chambers of the pyramids of Unas (dynasty V), Teti, Pepi I, Merenre and Pepi II (dynasty VI), and those of certain of their queens and short-lived successors. (Fig. 7)
- b) *privatemonumentalhieroglyphicinscriptions*: principally the funerary autobiographies, funerary offerings and prayers, and tomb scene inscriptions and captions of officials of late dynasty V and dynasty VI (and down into the First Intermediate Period).
- c) *administrative documents and letters in hieratic (hieratic is the cursive hand-written equivalent of monumental hieroglyphic)*: principally the Abusir papyri, which concern the administration of the funerary complex of king Neferirkare (dynasty V) (Fig. 8), and a few letters notably group from Elephantine.

Middle Egyptian

In the First Intermediate period and with the rise of the Middle Kingdom a new written idiom developed which rapidly became standardized-Middle Egyptian- and new genres of texts supplemented the old. The Ancient Egyptians themselves recognized this as the classic phase of the language, not least because of the number of literary classics composed in Middle Egyptian (which were used as school-models throughout the New Kingdom). The major sources are:



(Fig. 7) Pyramid Texts. King Teti Pyramid, (Sixth Dynasty), Saqqara.



(Fig. 8) Abusir Papyri. (Fifth dynasty). © Trustees of the British Museum.

a) *Monumental inscriptions, both royal and private*, continue in the Middle Kingdom (with private autobiographies and funerary stelae comprising the majority of the surviving material), as well as funerary prayers and prayers to the gods (both in monumental hieroglyphic and cursive hieratic sources). The genre of the autobiography or self-presentation is particularly important. Autobiographies usually draw on two major themes: *ethical behavior (ideal biography)* asserting that the owner lived life according to the ethical norms, values and responsibility embodied in *ma'at* 'the good', often cast in terms of canonic exemplary acts; and *success and achievement (career biography)* detailing achievements and events reflecting the

owner's success in life, particularly in his official career in the royal service.

b) *Literature*, Out of the genre of the funerary autobiography (with its focus on achievement and ethical conduct) developed the most important genre of Middle Egyptian material– the great literary texts of the Middle Kingdom written in hieratic on papyri. These range from stories which draw directly on the themes of autobiography (e.g. *the Story of Sinuhe* and *the Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor*) to didactic instructions (wisdom literature) on how to live the 'good life' according to the ethical norms embodied in the elite society of the Middle Kingdom (e.g. *the Instructions of Ptahhotep* (Fig. 9) and



(Fig. 9) The instructions of Ptahhotep. © Trustees of the British Museum.

the Instructions to King Merikare). However, both autobiographical and didactic themes occur in both types of text (shown clearly in texts such as *the Story of the Eloquent Peasant*). These themes are orientated around the concept of ma'at (*m3at*) 'what is good, right, proper, just and true', a central principle in Ancient Egyptian thinking which covered both the ethics of personal conduct and the understanding of the nature and proper order of the world. (Fig. 10)

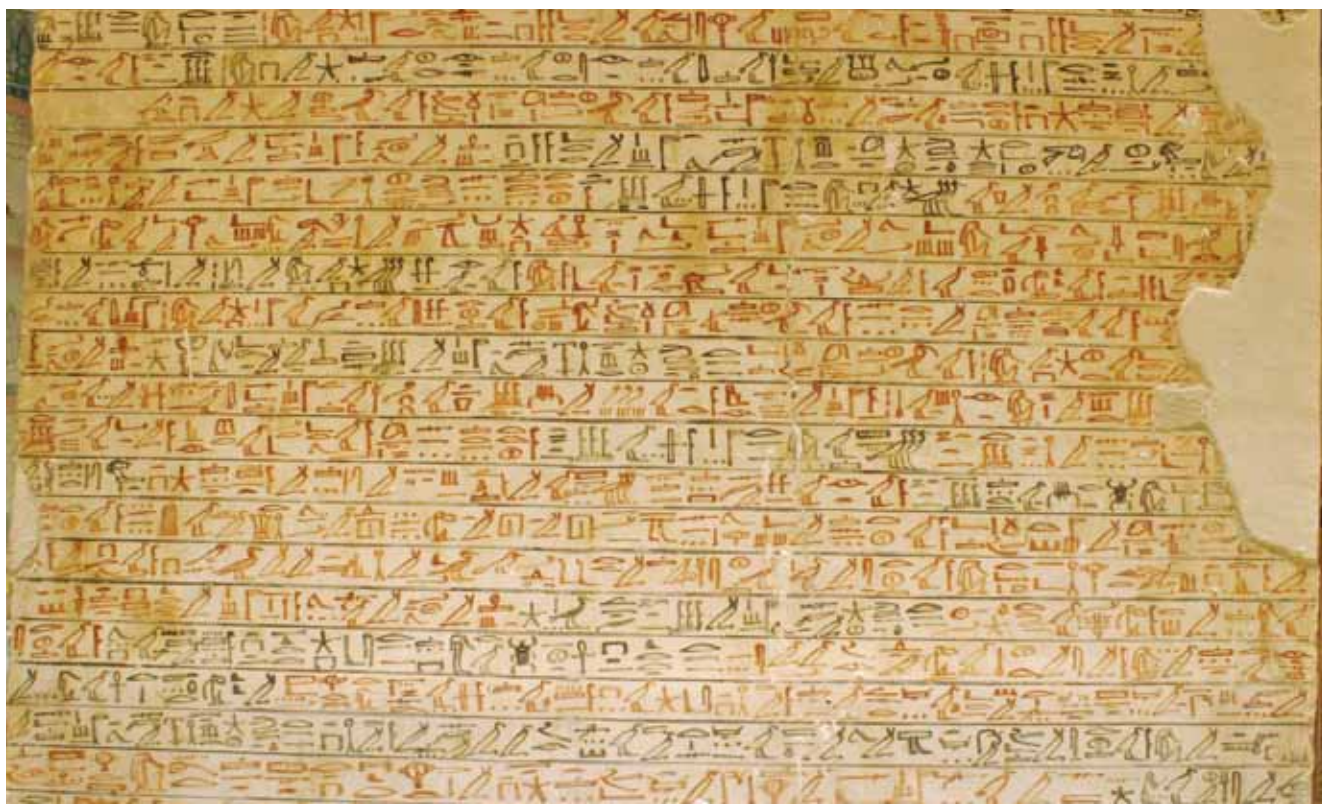
- c) 'Magico-medical' texts (or Protection texts) written in hieratic with specialized vocabulary and sometimes obscure meaning.



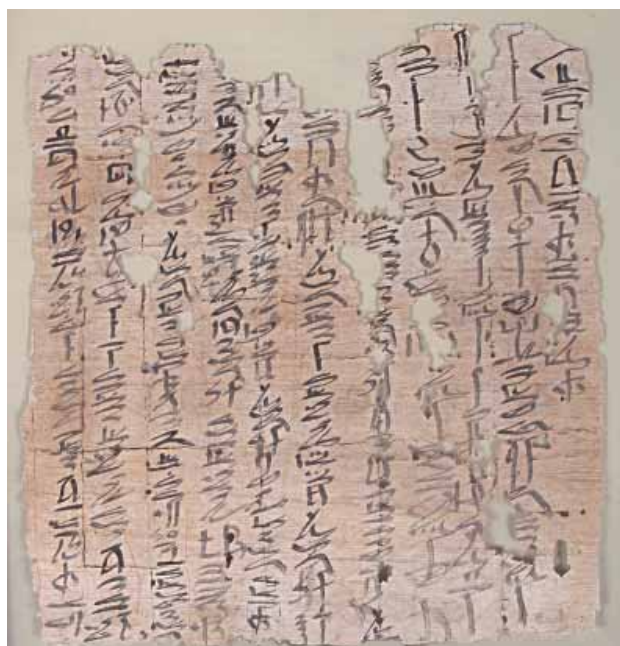
(Fig. 10) The Story of the Eloquent Peasant. © Trustees of the British Museum.

- d) *The Coffin Texts*: The Old Kingdom royal funerary-magical Pyramid Texts carved in hieroglyphic were replaced by the Coffin Texts, which occur on a large number of private coffins of the elite, mostly of the Middle Kingdom. These are composed in an idiom very close to Middle Egyptian as defined above and written in an abbreviated 'handwriting' version of hieroglyphs, *cursive hieroglyphs* (also found on a few papyri of this period). (Fig. 11)

- c) *Administrative and Private Documents* (including administrative records, contracts, letters etc.): principally from the site of Lahun in the Fayoum and a few other letters/collections of letters (e.g. the Hekanakht letters) and administrative material (e.g. *the Semna dispatches*). These are written in hieratic on papyri and composed in a version of Middle Egyptian which displays a number of features closer to the spoken language of the time and without the stylistic constraints observable in the classical idiom of monumental and literary texts. (Fig. 12)



(Fig. 11) Cursive hieroglyphs. Tomb of Thumosis III, Valley of Kings.



(Fig. 12) Administrative Papyrus. Cairo Museum, JE 95570.

Late Egyptian and New Kingdom Middle Egyptian

Late Egyptian, the language of the New Kingdom, has been classified primarily on the basis of the extensive material from Deir el-Medina from the late XIX and XX dynasties but is also exhibited (in earlier forms) in a few letters and administrative documents which survive from the XVIII and early XIX dynasties. A closely related idiom (literary Late Egyptian) was used in the composition of literary texts, a number of which survive from the XIX and XX dynasties (e.g. *The Story of Horus and Seth* and *The Story of the Doomed Prince*). However, in the early New Kingdom (until the later XVIII dynasty), monumental royal and official texts were composed in an idiom which

is closely modeled on the grammar of Middle Egyptian and will be referred to as *New Kingdom Middle Egyptian*. Although generally faithful to the conventions of Middle Egyptian proper, a number of novel grammatical features and usages also occur.

New Kingdom Middle Egyptian (or possibly New Kingdom edited Middle Egyptian) is also used in certain funerary and religious works such as *the Book of the Dead*, (Fig. 13) the New Kingdom successor of the Coffin Texts written in cursive hieroglyphs on papyrus, and other funerary texts painted or carved on the walls of the royal tombs of the New Kingdom such as the Amduat (the book of what is in the *underworld*).

An idiom based on Middle Egyptian was used in monumental, funerary, religious and some literary texts down to the rise of Christianity as a state religion (of the Roman Empire) in the fourth/fifth century CE.

Demotic

Around 700 BCE a new script -Demotic- probably of Lower Egyptian origin, was introduced. This wrote a form of the language



(Fig. 13) Book of the Dead.

closely akin to the spoken language of the day (although it is still very close to the language used in late hieratic documents and in the ‘abnormal hieratic’ documents of the 8th-7th centuries BCE from Upper Egypt). This language phase is also known as *Demotic* (though we should be careful to distinguish between Demotic as a script and Demotic as a language-phase). This

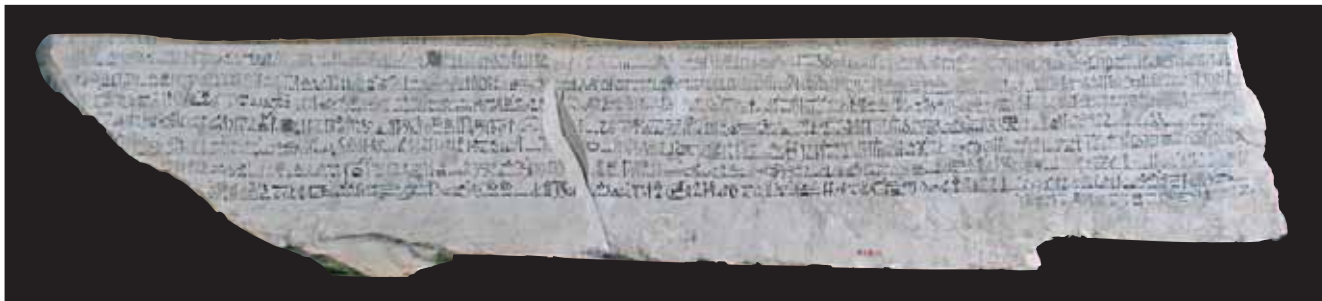


(Fig. 14) Contract written in Demotic, dated back to Sixth Century BCE. Cairo Museum, JdE 47755.

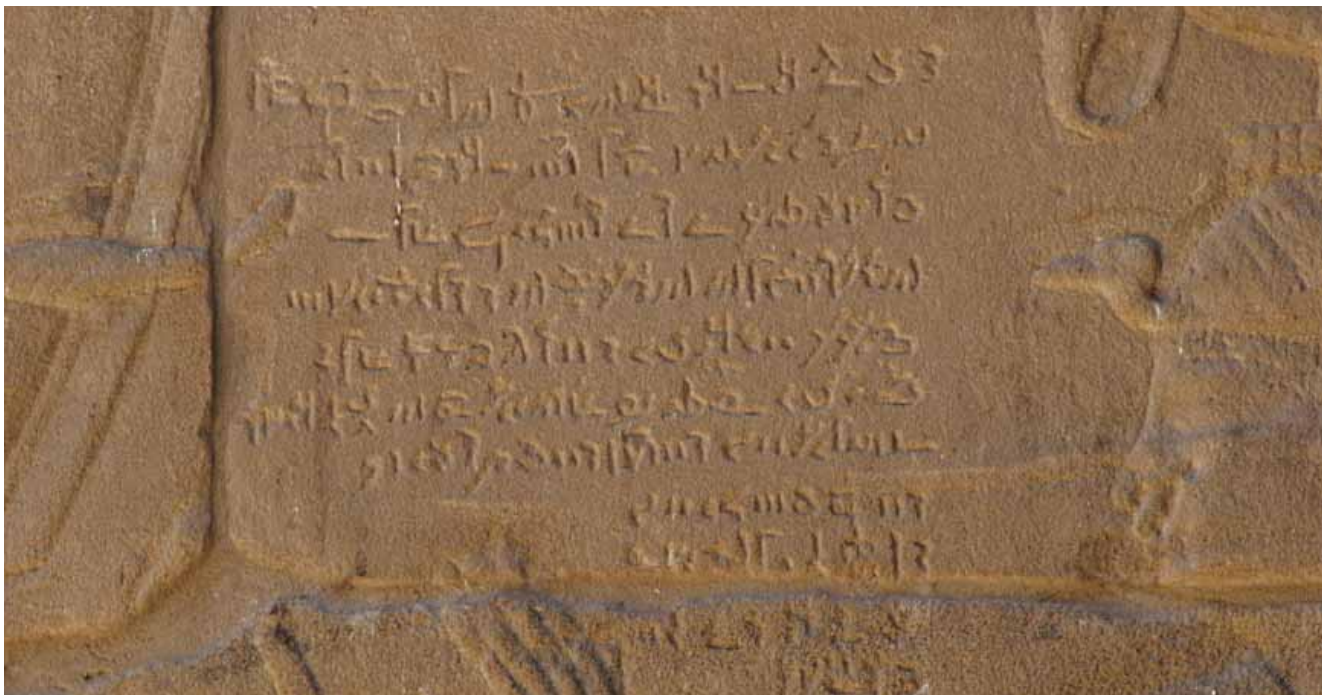
script and language continued in use until the fifth century CE and was used extensively for administrative and private purposes (including letters, contracts and the like) as well as for literary texts (stories such as the Setne-Khaemwese and Inaros-Petubastis cycles of stories and didactic literature such as the Instructions of Onchsheshonky). (Figs 14, 15, 16)

Coptic

The final phase in the history of Ancient Egyptian is that of the Coptic language and script. In the Ptolemaic period (third to first centuries BCE) an alphabet based on the Greek model with the addition of symbols borrowed from Demotic (to represent Egyptian sounds which did not appear in Greek) was already in



(Fig. 15) Limestone ostracon inscribed with Sinuhe Story.



(Fig. 16) The latest inscription on stone in Demotic, dates back to 452 CE. Isis Temple, Philae Island.

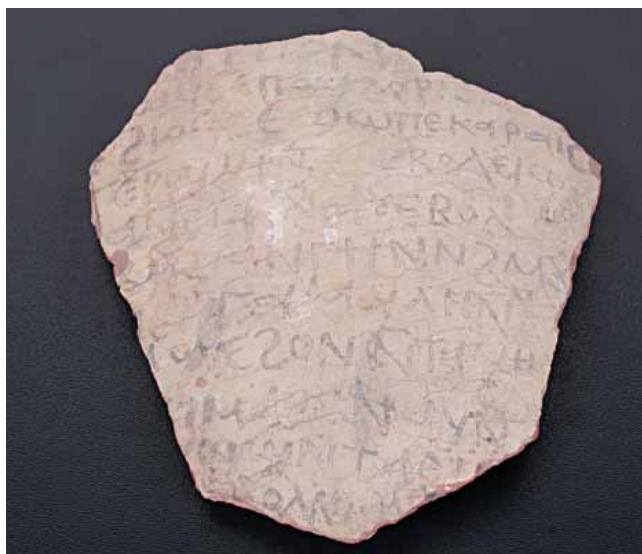
use mostly for glossing religious and magical texts to give the exact pronunciation of certain words (Old Coptic). Then, in the second and third centuries CE, Christian missionaries were active in Egypt and adopted this script in translating the scriptures into written Egyptian. An important feature of this script is that it renders the vowels of the language (something which was not done in hieroglyphs, hieratic or demotic) and allows various highly stylized ‘dialects’ to be distinguished (principally Sahidic, Boharic, Akhmimic, Sub-Akhmimic and Fayyumic). As well as other religious writings such as the lives of various saints and didactic works, the Coptic script and language were also used for secular writings such as letters, administrative and business documents. Coptic remained in use amongst the Christian population after the Muslim conquest of 641 CE until it died out as a spoken language somewhere between 1000–1500 CE. Parts of the church liturgy are still read

out in Coptic (with an Arabic translation) to this day. (Figs 17, 18)

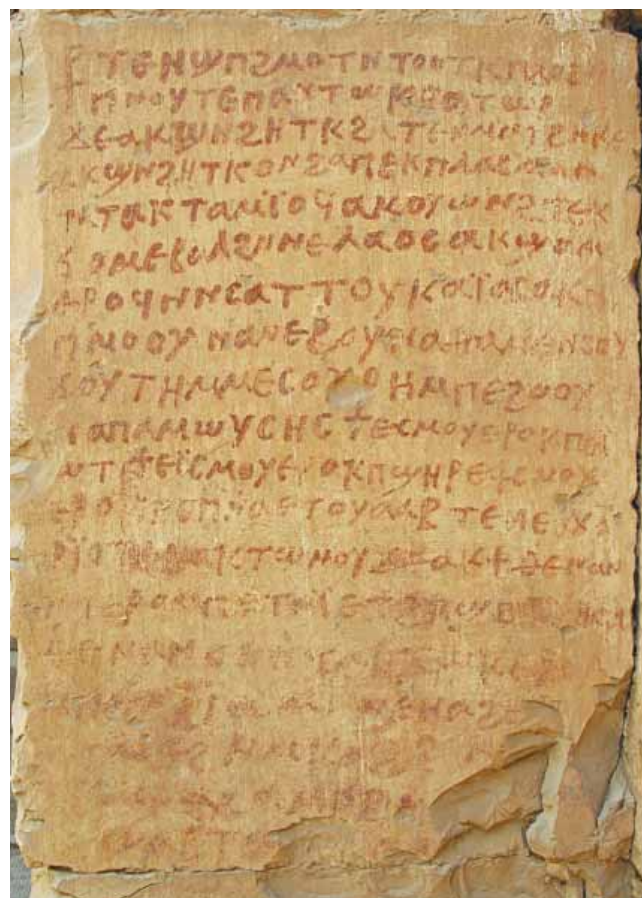
Arrangement and Direction of Writing Scripts

The scripts are usually written and read from right to left, but also occur reading from left to right, particularly for aesthetic purposes. The texts can also be written in horizontal lines or vertical lines, Egyptian is visually versatile and easily adapts to the place in which it is written.

In Egyptian only consonantal sounds and not vowels are written, so that a basic written word



(Fig. 17) Coptic Ostraca.



(Fig. 18) Coptic Graffiti. Corridor of Kings. Sety I Temple. Abydos.

could conceivably have had various permutations of vowel sounds attached to it. For example, the word for a house is written *pr*. It may have been pronounced ‘*per*’, ‘*aper*’, ‘*pero*’, or ‘*epré*’. The pronunciation of the word might have changed depending on the function of the word within a sentence: ‘the house is big’ = ‘*per*’ (house is subject of the sentence); ‘the man enters the house’ = ‘*epré*’ (house is object of the sentence). By extension, nuances of tense may have been rendered in the spoken tongue but not in the written language, so they certainly existed but were not written.

In order to be able to communicate to each other how they understand Egyptian, Egyptologists use a system of converting hieroglyphs into a script based on the Roman alphabet. This method of rendering the characters of one language in those of another is called transliteration. For example, the word 𓆎 is shown in transliteration as ‘*r*’, the latter sign representing ‘*ayin*’, a sound not found in English, but which occurs in Semitic and in Arabic. It is pronounced something like ‘*raa*’ and is the word for the ‘sun’ or for a ‘day’. When ‘*r*’ is written down, Egyptologists can therefore see how the word is being read and understood in the context of a sentence. For words which are spelled out this is not so vital, but sometimes words are written in a very abbreviated fashion and how they are understood could affect the meaning of a sentence. For example, 𓆏 by itself could be read *sispt*, ‘*sky*’, or as *hry*, ‘what is above’ or ‘chief’. With any luck the rest of the sentence in which this sign occurs (the context) will help to give its meaning.

By the Middle Kingdom, the form, arrangement and direction of the writing of hieroglyphs had

become standardized. Hieroglyphic inscriptions were organized into registers of vertical columns or horizontal lines, often demarcated by guide lines or base lines. The signs were placed in a continuous sequence without any punctuation marks or word spacing:

Hieroglyphic inscriptions are normally written from right to left (however, left to right order will be adopted in these notes for convenience). Horizontal and vertical inscriptions written from left to right also occur, but usually to accompany a left-facing figure, or to provide symmetry in a composition or simply to follow the outline or contours of an object.

Examples display uses of all four directions of writing (right horizontal, right vertical, left horizontal and left vertical). (Figs 19, 20, 21, 22)

A second important principle which these examples demonstrate is that hieroglyphs were not written one after the other as in our script, but in groups in a balanced arrangement to fill the available space, to attain a balanced composition and to fill the available space, signs were often used in different sizes and in differing arrangements

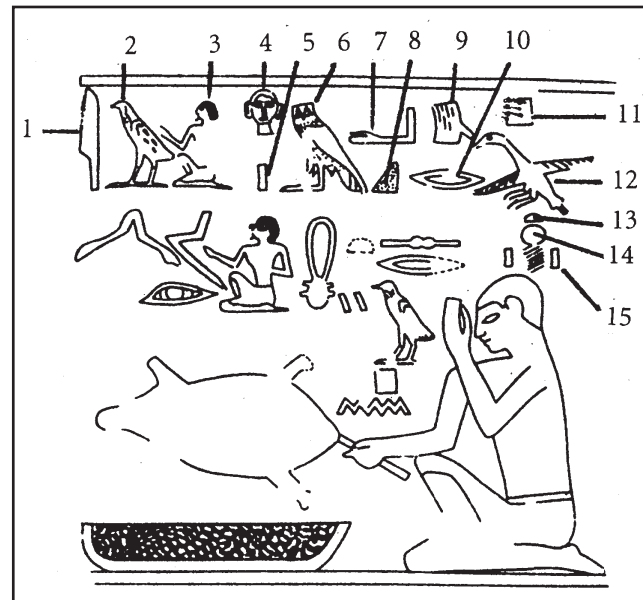
The general principles of hieroglyphic writing

Hieroglyphs have three major usages: some signs are used to indicate the sounds of words (*sound-signs*), others to give indications of the meaning of words (*meaning-signs*), and some to indicate both sound and meaning (*sound-meaning-signs*): hieroglyphic signs sound meaning sound-signs sound meaning signs meaning-signs (*phonograms*)



(Fig.19) Writing direction. Tomb of Pached. Deir el-Medina.

(*ideograms*) (*determinative*). It is standard to *transliterate* hieroglyphs into our alphabet; only sound-signs are transliterated, not meaning-signs. Transliteration can look a little bizarre at first since only consonants are (generally) written in the script, not vowels (a, c, i, o, u). Slightly different systems of transliteration are currently in use, differing primarily in whether or not elements are included in transliteration which are not written but hypothesized on the basis of what is known about Middle Egyptian grammar. Some words are written with signs which convey both sound and meaning (sound-meaning signs, often termed ‘ideograms’ or



(Fig. 20) Writing direction. Tomb of Senbi, Meir.

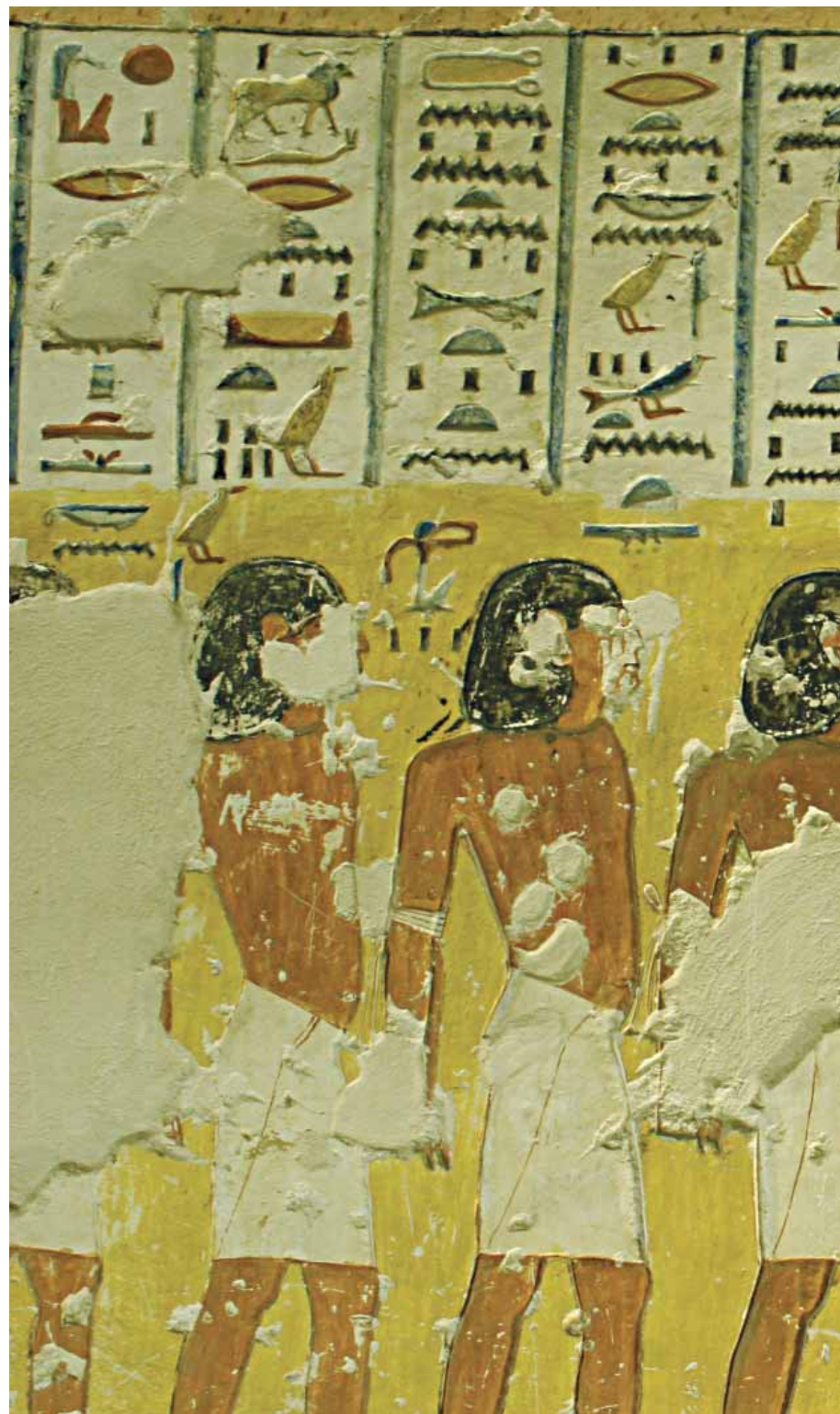


(Fig. 21) Writing direction. Tomb of Sennejem. Deir el-Medina.

‘logograms’). For example *pr* depicts a house (in plan) and represents the sound combination *p + r - pr* (say ‘*per*’). This sign is used in the word *pr* (‘*per*’) ‘house’ (vertical stroke is a sign often used with sound-meaning signs to indicate their status as ideograms; it is also used more generally as a space filler) *pr* (‘*per*’) also occurs in *pr* (‘*per*’) ‘go (out)’, a word which also contains the consonants *p* and *t*; it is here used as a *sound-sign pr*. This is termed the ‘rebus principle’. On this basis hieroglyphs derived their sound values and could be used in words quite unrelated in meaning to the object depicted in the hieroglyph. *Sound-signs* can also be used as *sound complements* fleshing out (part of) the sound conveyed by another sound-sign. In *pr*, *r* is used to flesh out the *r* of *pr*. In general, if a sign repeats a consonant already contained in a previous sign, it is being used as a sound-complement

Grammar in Egyptian

As in any language, there is a full range of grammar in Egyptian with rules about how sentences



(Fig. 22) Writing direction. Tomb of Ramses IV. Valley of Kings.



should be constructed. It has nouns (name words), adjectives (describing words, characterization), adverbs (giving additional information about actions), and verbs (doing words). The latter have tense (events in the past, present, or future), aspect (the kind of action, either completed or repeated), mood (indicative statements of fact, or subjunctive dependent on something else, or desirable), and voice (active action performed by subject, passive action performed on subject). The word order in Middle Egyptian is different from Western languages: verbs usually come at the beginning of sentences, 'goes out the man from his house'; adjectives come after the word they describe, 'He is a scribe, excellent, attentive'; sentences are made up of blocks of ideas in grammatical constructions: '*sun with moon 'in

sky' contains three basic ideas:

1. 'the sun and the moon';
2. what are they doing? 'in' and
3. where? 'the sky'. The whole sentence then reads 'the sun and the moon are in the sky'. Egyptian does not have words for 'the' or 'a' (definite and indefinite articles) until Late Egyptian and in many sentences not even for 'is' and 'are'. The fact that Egyptian seems to use markers, such as special words (particles) or constructions (word order) which act like my asterisks above to indicate when certain ideas are in operation or converters to highlight the differences in sentence meaning, is a major conceptual difference between



(Fig. 23) Word Order. Tomb of Ramses IV. Valley of Kings.

