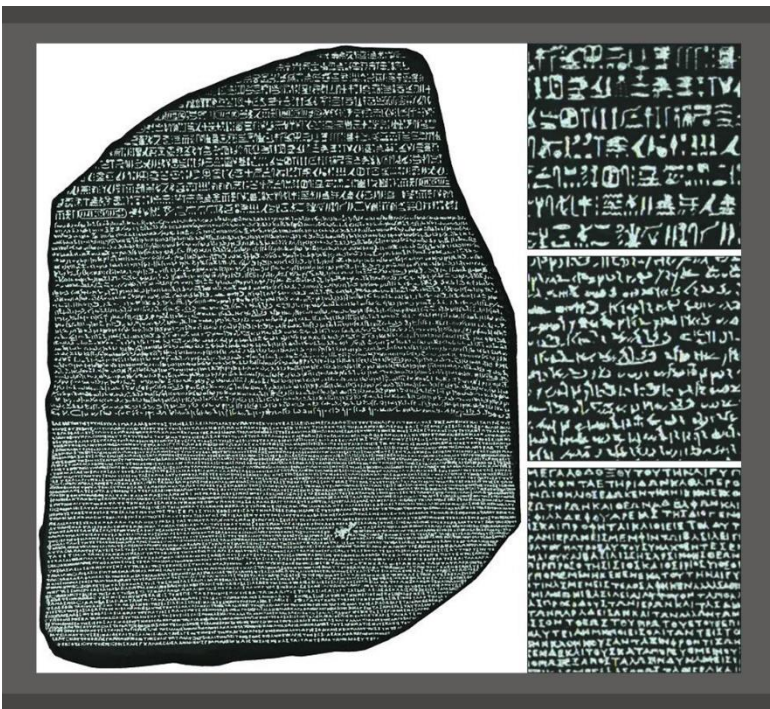


About Egyptian Language

Fast Facts

- The word *hieroglyph* is from the Greek, meaning ‘sacred carving’.
- Egyptians may have learned about writing from the Sumerians.
- The Egyptians were the first to use papyrus writing paper.
- Hieroglyphs could be read from left to right, right to left, or vertically, depending on the way the signs faced.
- Demotic writing came into use late in ancient Egypt’s history. The word *demotic* means ‘the people’s writing’. This took the place of Hieroglyphic writing over time.
- Egyptians believed hieroglyphics were magical and that writing was a sacred act.
- The Egyptian spoken language was related to the languages of southwestern Asia and to some in northern Africa. It was eventually replaced with Arabic.



Hieroglyphics was the original writing system of ancient Egypt. It was an alphabet that consisted of hieroglyphs or picture symbols. They may look easy to understand, but there were many ways to use them. In earlier times, a hieroglyph was a literal symbol for an object. For example, a picture of a bird would mean ‘bird’. Eventually, a hieroglyph could also be used as a sound or syllable – the way we now use a letter or a combination of letters from our alphabet. A picture of a bird might be a syllable in a word that has nothing to do with birds. Some hieroglyphs represented more than one letter. For example, a horned snake (sometimes called a viper) was both the letter *F* and the letter *V*. Some letters could be represented by more than one hieroglyph (*H* was sometimes a shelter and other times it looked like a twisted rope). At first, there were about 700 hieroglyphic symbols, but that number grew over time. Vowels and punctuation were not represented

in hieroglyphics.

Most Egyptians were not literate. That is, they could not read or write. During some of ancient Egypt’s history, only government officials called scribes were literate.

As you can imagine, it must have been hard to write quickly with hieroglyphs. That is why Egyptians used two other writing systems that were easier to scribble down in a hurry. They were called hieratic writing and demotic writing. The hieroglyphic system was used mainly for tombs or temples, while the other languages were used for keeping records. However, hieroglyphs have also been found carved into stone and pottery and written with black ink on scrolls of papyrus.

Egyptians began using hieroglyphs soon after the First Dynasty began, around 3,100 B.C. The last hieroglyphic inscription historians have found is dated A.D. 394. Soon after that, hieroglyphics became a ‘dead’ language, meaning no one used it anymore. It was not until the early 1800s that the modern world learned how to translate hieroglyphics, thanks to an amazing archeological find called the Rosetta Stone. The Stone was dated back to 196 B.C., and had text written in three languages: hieroglyphic, demotic, and Greek.