

Omniglot *a guide to written language*

Writing systems: abjads | alphabets | syllabic alphabets | syllabaries | complex scripts
undeciphered scripts | alternative scripts | your con-scripts | A-Z index

Ancient Egyptian scripts



- [Origins of Egyptian Hieroglyphs](#)
- [Hieroglyphs representing one consonant](#)
- [Hieroglyphs representing two consonants](#)
- [Hieroglyphs representing three consonants](#)
- [Hieroglyphic determinatives](#)
- [Numerals](#)
- [Hieratic script](#)
- [Demotic script](#)
- [Coptic alphabet](#)
- [Books about Egyptian Hieroglyphs](#)
- [Links](#)

Origins of Egyptian Hieroglyphs

The ancient Egyptians believed that writing was invented by the god Thoth and called their hieroglyphic script "*mdw-ntr*" (god's words). The word hieroglyph comes from the Greek *hieros* (sacred) plus *glypho* (inscriptions) and was first used by Clement of Alexandria.

The earliest known examples of writing in Egypt have been dated to 3,400 BC. The latest dated inscription in hieroglyphs was made on the gate post of a temple at Philae in 396 AD.

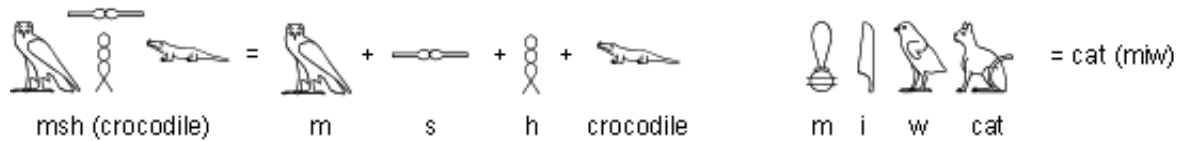
The hieroglyphic script was used mainly for formal inscriptions on the walls of temples and tombs. In some inscriptions the glyphs are very detailed and in full colour, in others they are simple outlines. For everyday writing the [hieratic script](#) was used.

After the Emperor Theodosius I ordered the closure of all pagan temples throughout the Roman empire in the late 4th century AD, knowledge of the hieroglyphic script was lost until the early 19th century, when a French man named Jean-Francois Champollion (1790-1832) managed to decipher the script.

Notable features

- Possibly pre-dates Sumerian Cuneiform writing - if this is true, the Ancient Egyptian script is the oldest known writing system. Another possibility is that the two scripts developed at more or less the same time.
- The direction of writing in the hieroglyphic script varied - it could be written in horizontal lines running either from left to right or from right to left, or in vertical columns running from top to bottom. You can tell the direction of any piece of writing by looking at the way the animals and people are facing - they look towards the beginning of the line.

- The arrangement of glyphs was based partly on artistic considerations.
- A fairly consistent core of 700 glyphs was used to write Classical or Middle Egyptian (ca. 2000-1650 BC), though during the Greco-Roman eras (332 BC - ca. 400 AD) over 5,000 glyphs were in use.
- The glyphs have both semantic and phonetic values. For example, the glyph for crocodile is a picture of a crocodile and also represents the sound "msh". When writing the word for crocodile, the Ancient Egyptians combined a picture of a crocodile with the glyphs which spell out "msh". Similarly the hieroglyphs for cat, *miw*, combine the glyphs for m, i and w with a picture of a cat.



Used to write:

Egyptian, an Afro-Asiatic language spoken in Egypt until about the 10th century AD. After that it continued to be used as the liturgical language of Egyptian Christians, the Copts, in the form of **Coptic**.

Hieroglyphs representing single consonants

These glyphs alone could be used to write Ancient Egyptian and represent the first alphabet ever devised. In practice, they were rarely used in the fashion.

vulture	flowering reed	flowering reeds	twisted flax	forearm	foot	stool	horned viper	owl
ʃ	ṛ	y	ʕ	w	p	f	m	
[ʃ]	[ṛ]	(word final)	[ʕ]	[w]	[p]	[f]	[m]	
water	mouth	reed shelter	twisted flax	sieve	animal's belly	door bolt	folded cloth	pool
n	r	h	ḥ	ḫ	ḥ	s	š	
[n]	[r]		[ḥ]	[ḫ]	[ḥ]	[s]	[š]	
hill slope	basket with handle	jar stand	loaf	tethering rope	hand	snake		
q	k	g	t	ṯ	d	ḏ		
[q]	[k]	[g]	[t]	[ṯ]	[d]	[ḏ]		

Numerals

By combining the following glyphs, any number could be constructed. The higher value signs were always written in front of the lower value ones.

						
one	ten	one hundred	one thousand	ten thousand	one hundred thousand	one million or many

Sample text



Transliteration: *iw wnm msh nsw*, this means "The crocodile eats the king".

Other information about Egyptian writing

[Origins of Hieroglyphs](#) | [One consonant Hieroglyphs](#) | [Two consonant Hieroglyphs](#) | [Three consonant Hieroglyphs](#) | [Hieroglyphic determinatives](#) | [Hieroglyphic Numerals](#) | [Hieratic script](#) | [Demotic script](#) | [Coptic alphabet](#) | [Links](#)



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Ancient Egyptian, [Chinese](#), [Ch?-nôm](#), [Japanese](#), [Jurchen](#), [Khitan](#), [Linear B](#), [Mayan](#), [Naxi](#), [Nushu](#), [Tangut \(Hsihsia\)](#)

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