

## How to decipher an unknown script

Deciphering an unknown script is a difficult task. The process takes much time, knowledge and patience. It often takes many people many years to begin understanding the basic structure of an unknown writing system. This is a list of some of the stages which people go through in deciphering unknown scripts.

1. Look for proper names which might be known from another source

Sometimes the names of rulers and historical figures appear in foreign texts. Identifying names of people is helpful because it means that you know how the name appears in the other script and can work out possible meanings for signs.

For example, Queen Cleopatra was a famous queen of Egypt whose name appeared in many foreign texts. Once scholars realised that they could identify Cleopatra's name in a text written in Egyptian hieroglyphs, they could try assigning different sounds to the signs used to write her name.

2. Look for known phrases which might be repeated

In some cultures, there are certain phrases which are used again and again. By identifying one such phrase you may be able to identify what type of text you are looking at.

For example, in Akkadian inscriptions the Assyrian king's name is always followed by this phrase: 'King of Kings, King of Assyria'. Once scholars identified this phrase in an inscription they knew it was a royal document.

3. Find bilingual or trilingual inscriptions

Sometimes ancient texts were written in several different scripts. When one of the scripts is known, it is possible to begin to work out which parts of the text are actually saying the same thing. After this, people are able to begin working out the meaning of the signs.

4. Determine what you are working out. Is it a known or unknown language, is it a known or an unknown script?

5. Isolate signs or groups of signs

The number of signs often helps you to work out what type of writing system it is

6. Look for patterns (signs used again and again, for instance at the beginning or end of an inscription)

7. Make a collection of all known examples of writing

8. Make an index of signs with reference to where/when/on what they appear

9. Look at frequency of repeating signs

10. Look for overlapping and/or crowding of signs to help determine the direction of the writing