

# 5.7 Write like an Egyptian

People started writing around 3000 BCE. The first were the Sumerians from **Mesopotamia**, followed by the Egyptians. The ancient Greeks called the ‘picture writing’ they inscribed on their many religious statues, tombs and temple walls ‘hieroglyphs’. Translated, this meant ‘sacred writing’. Being able to read this old language has allowed historians to learn much about the society and culture of ancient Egypt.

## The first alphabet

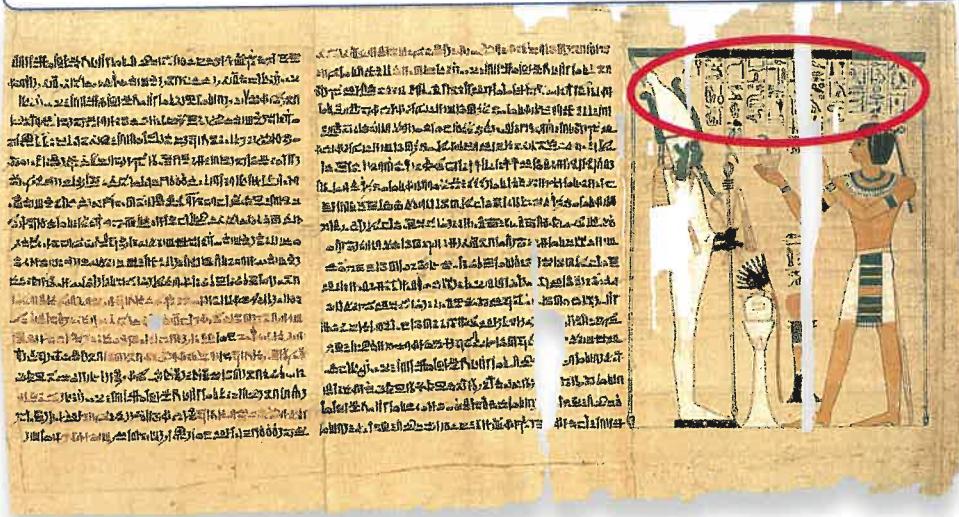
The hieroglyphic ‘alphabet’ was much larger than ours — it was made up of more than 700 symbols. Some of these were simple drawings, such as a bird, and others were shapes, such as a semicircle. At first, each symbol stood for a word. As the language became more complex, some symbols came also to stand for other language elements besides single words, such as:

- the sound of a consonant (for example, the symbol for an owl also stood for the sound of the letter *m*)
- the sound of a syllable (for example, the symbol for a board game also stood for the sound of the letters *men*)
- ideas or actions (for example, the symbol for a leg shown twice stood for the idea of movement)
- signals to help the reader understand what was meant. A signal might be put at the end of a word so readers knew it had a different meaning from another of the same symbol. (If we used this technique today, we might place a sketch of a bus at the end of the word ‘trip’ to show that it meant ‘a journey’ and not ‘to fall over.’)

## Reading hieroglyphs

At first, hieroglyphic symbols were laid out in columns. People read down each column, from top to bottom. From about 2000 BCE, the symbols were arranged in rows, more like our writing. Sometimes they were read from left to right (as we read) and other times from right to left. So that the reader knew where to start, a

**Source 1** This papyrus sheet shows an Egyptian high priest presenting an offering to Osiris, the god of the afterlife. It contains both the hieroglyphic script (circled) and the simpler **hieratic script** (left and centre).



symbol of a person, animal or bird was put at the start or end of the line. The direction in which the symbol faced marked the start of a line. So, if a bird faced right, you would read the line from right to left.

Sometimes a symbol was placed above another, rather than to the side of it. In this event, the symbol on top was read first.

The name of a pharaoh was always enclosed in a cartouche — a bullet-shaped oval.

Symbols for single sounds

a	b	c, k	d	e, y
f	g	h	i	j
l	m	n	o	p
q	r	s	t	u
w	x	z	th	sh

Symbols for syllables

neb	ankh	mer	mes
su	sha	ka	men

**Source 2** Translators have been able to link hieroglyphic symbols with most of the letters of our alphabet.

## Simpler forms

Hieroglyphs were used mainly for religious purposes and in official documents. Priests and scribes could write and read using the system. This is why they can be found in tombs. But hieroglyphs took a lot of time to produce, so simpler, faster scripts were developed. Two other scripts, called **hieratic** (**Source 1**) and **demotic**, were used by ordinary people. Both these scripts used hieroglyphic symbols but in simpler forms.

## Decoding hieroglyphs

After pagan temples were shut down in 392 CE (when Christianity was declared an official religion of Rome), people lost the ability to read and write hieroglyphs. For 1500 years or so it remained a mystery. Then in 1799 a French soldier discovered a large stone covered in carved writing near the town of Rosetta (now called Rashid) in the Nile delta. It carried a statement by the pharaoh Ptolemy V in three different scripts — hieroglyphs, demotic and ancient Greek. The hieroglyphs puzzled scholars for 20 years. Then a translator named Jean François Champollion used his knowledge of ancient Greek and many other languages to break the code.

**Source 3** The Rosetta Stone — interpretation of its hieroglyphs allowed scholars to learn much about ancient Egypt.



## Activities



### EXPLANATION AND COMMUNICATION

- 1 What does the Greek word ‘hieroglyph’ mean?
- 2 Why was the Rosetta Stone such a key find?
- 3 Use **Source 2** to decode this message.



### ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES

- 4 Study **Source 1** and complete the following tasks.
  - a Explain which person in this illustration is Osiris. Justify your decision.
  - b Write a paragraph in your notebook describing how Osiris is portrayed.
- 5 Use **Source 2** to write a short message in hieroglyphs that will clearly reveal who wrote it. Place the messages in a pot. Select one that is not your own and try to identify who wrote it.
- 6 Work in small teams to make a sheet of ‘papyrus’. Cut a sheet of thick blotting paper (or similar) into strips. Spray strips with a starch solution until they are wet but not sodden. Then lay them in two crossing layers and beat them together. (Place a sheet of lightly oiled greaseproof paper underneath so the paper can be removed once dry.) Polish the beaten sheet with a stone. Then pin down the corners (to stop curling) and place it in the sun to dry.
- 7 Use the piece of ‘papyrus’ you have made and the hieroglyphic symbols on the previous page to create a message for other members of the class to translate. Put these on the display board.



**Source 4** How the ancient Egyptians used the stalk of the papyrus reed to make paper.

**demotic script** the simplest of the ancient Egyptian scripts, which was almost like handwriting  
**hieratic script** Egyptian script that was less decorative and complex than hieroglyphs  
**Mesopotamia** the land where it is believed the first human civilisations were developed; includes parts of modern Iraq, Turkey and Syria