Reading the Rosetta Stone:
Introduction to Ptolemaic Hieroglyphs

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1   1/26/2026

- most signs in "Ptolemaic" hieroglyphs reflect standard, conventional use, as reflected in e.g. Gardiner's sign list
    - example from temple text: the one unusual sign is a dog [jackal?] signifying the phonetic value *ii*
    - Ptolemaic has "7000" signs, but in practice, most texts rely predominantly on the "700" or so standard signs that most students will know
    - Leitz on a ritual scene from the temple of Dendara: 362 signs, 342 of which are conventional, 10 are common Late Egyptian substitute uniliterals
- Ptolemaic inscriptions often juxtapose playful or unusual writings against more standard writings


ḫwi.n=f ḥꜣ=sn m inb pn r ifd nn iry m ifd

He made protection around them with this wall on the four sides of these [gods].

- standing baboon with arms raised: an unusual but common Ptolemaic writing of *nfr*
- TempleTexte: https://www.tempeltexte.uni-tuebingen.de/portal/
- [*The Temple of Esna: An Evolving Translation*, by David Klotz: https://bookdown.org/shemanefer/Esna3/]
- "Ptolemaic" can be a misleading term. Ptolemaic hieroglyphs do not only appear in Ptolemaic or Roman inscriptions. Conversely, not all such inscriptions stick to "Ptolemaic" readings/values of given hieroglyphs, but may use older readings/values.
- *Pꜣ-di-ꜣImn-nb-ns.t-tꜣ.wy*: In his copy of the Book of the Dead, his name uses the Ptolemaic obelisk sign for the name Amun
- *m-ḫnw* evolves phonetically to sound like *mw ḫr nw*, which is then spelled: *m(w) ḫr nw*
- *pri* spelled with an *f* viper leaving a box(!); *ꜥḳ* spelled with the viper entering the box
- the principles by which Ptolemaic glyphs derive their values were not new to the Ptolemaic Period, but (expansions of) older, existing principles

- Traditional Egyptian: "From 404 BCE [to] 394 CE hieroglyphic texts were in general composed in the high-status language variety termed Traditional Egyptian." https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8g73w3gp
  - inconsistent n vs m distinction
  - inconsistent sDm=f vs sDm.n=f
  - reduction of statives, infinitives, affixes
  - phonetic changes reflected in script
  - imitation of earlier phases
  - text-specific idiosyncrasies
  - attested from the New Kingdom through Roman Periods
  - "linguistic interference" from all stages of the language
- Joachim Quack doesn't believe that Ptolemaic hieroglyphs exist as a true separate category: There is no phase of the language that can be definitively called Ptolemaic.
- the following glyphs all signified phonetic k in what Champollion read:
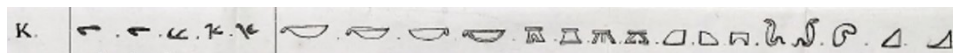
- Leitz: "[Ptolemaic] is not some arcane branch"!
- hieroglyph theory:
  - a literal description of the *ba* bird as depicted in the *bꜣ* sign
  - Dendera VI, 157, 2: "As for Sobek who is in this place, it is Seth. As for the feather which is upon his head, it is Osiris." Then a glyph of a literal crocodile wearing a *maat* feather
- BD 17: "I know the name of this Medjed, who is among those inside of the temple of Osiris, who shoots with his eye, but one cannot see him; who circles heaven with flames of his mouth, who announces the flood, but one cannot see him."
- our main sign list:

  Kurth, *A Ptolemaic A Ptolemaic Sign-List. Hieroglyphs used in the Temples of the Graeco-Roman Period of Egypt and their Meanings*

- our main dictionary/lexicon:

  Wilson, *A Ptolemaic Lexikon: a Lexicographical Study of the Texts in the Temple of Edfu* (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta)

- derivation principles:
  - acrophony [think: "acronyms"]: we will mainly avoid this
  - the consonantal principle: drop weak sounds in multiliterals
  - phonetic shifts: *p* vs *b*, *m* to *b*, *m* vs *n*, *d* vs *t*, *ḳ* vs *k*
  - class (*f* vs *ḏ* snakes) and shape (*ḫ* vs *rꜥ* signs) substitutions, synonymy
  - direct representation (viper leaving/entering box; feather-wearing crocodile; "colorful of feathers, who comes forth from the horizon")
  - antonomasia (*nṯr ꜥꜣ* < epithet of Ihy < sistrum player, *iḳr* < epithet of Thoth < ibis), metonymy (*ny-sw.t* < King of Upper Egypt < white crown; *nṯr* < god < star [compare: Sumerian *dingir* sign])
  - synecdoche
  - logograms, the rebus principle

- ○ puns
- ○ ??? (*t3.wy* < two lands < scarab?)

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- example derivations of "new" readings:
  - ○ *m3ꜥ.(t)-ḫrw* < "wreath of justification" < Gardiner M2
  - ○ *ʾImn* < *n m iw* (Gaudard 2010), *i m n* (Sethe 1993), *im + n* (Fairman 1943)
  - ○ *dd*, e.g., in the name *Dd-ḥr* < *dd mdw.(t)* < *Dḥwty*?
- quasi-phonetic spellings of royal names:
  - ○ *Ptwlmys* < Ptolemy
  - ○ *Ḳliwp3dr3* < Cleopatra
  - ○ *K3ysrs* < Caesar
- use of the dual was fairly limited: e.g., to pairs of gods, pairs of body parts
- like in Late Egyptian (LE):
  - ○ the feminine *-t* was no longer pronounced in the spoken language, so it was often dropped in the script
  - ○ no gender/number agreement needed in the indirect genitive
  - ○ definite articles *p3, t3, n3*
  - ○ adverbial predicates are tenseless by default, with tense marked by converters
- *iwꜥ n nṯr.wy pri.wy* < "heir of the manifest gods" < heir of Πτολεμαῖος Ἐπιφανής Εὐχάριστος < heir of *Ptolemaῖos Epiphanḗs Eukháristos* < heir of Ptolemy V the Manifest, the Beneficent < Ptolemy VIII
- "Ptolemy VIII was a super-not-great dude… It was very Game-of-Thrones in this time period"
- *B3ḳ.t*, "The Shining One", is an epithet (not replacement) for *Km.t*, much like "a shining city on a hill" for Puritan Massachusetts
- If you memorize the cult epithets of the various Ptolemies, it can help with identifying these kings in Egyptian texts where they are named only by epithet.
- *sḫm ꜥnḫ ʾImn*, "living image of Amun", is a Ptolemaic evocation of the New Kingdom *Tw.t-ꜥnḫ-ʾImn* (!)
- the *nty* in *ꜥḥꜥy nty ꜥ3.t rwd.(t)*: maybe a precursor of the Coptic indefinite *nt-* prefix
- updates to the suffix pronouns:
  - ○ *-tw* established as the impersonal 3rd person singular pronoun
  - ○ *-w* now used as 3rd person plural pronoun
- Zoom chat: "what does imps mean?" "impersonal"
- in the spelling of *hy*, "husband": a penis
- *is*, derived from *ist/ist*, marks the start of an independent clause, usually an adverbial predicate
- Some people claim that there are no Egyptian creation myths with creator goddesses. "I'm here to tell you, that's bunk!"
- the particle *iw* can take different, contradictory roles:
  - ○ when used as in the Middle Egyptian (ME) *iw* for (circumstantial) adverbial predicates, it is a circumstantial converter marking an independent clause
  - ○ when used as in LE, it marks a dependent clause
- *wnn.in*: imperfect converter used in narrative contexts

- *wn*: imperfect converter used in non-narrative contexts
- Esna 206: a Neith creation myth documented on a single column of the temple of Esna

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