

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



hwi.n=f h3=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.tempelexte.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.
- P3-di-Inn-nb-ns.t-t3.wy*: In his copy of the Book of the Dead, his name uses the Ptolemaic obelisk sign for the name Amun
- m-hnw* evolves phonetically to sound like *mw hr nw*, which is then spelled: *m(w) hr nw*
- pri* spelled with an *f* viper leaving a box(!); *'k* 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 *b3* 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*, *k* vs *k̥*
 - class (*f* vs *d* snakes) and shape (*h* vs *r̥* signs) substitutions, synonymy
 - direct representation (viper leaving/entering box; feather-wearing crocodile; “colorful of feathers, who comes forth from the horizon”)
 - antonomasia (*ntr* ‘*ꜣ* < epithet of Ihy < sistrum player, *ikr* < epithet of Thoth < ibis), metonymy (*ny-sw.t* < King of Upper Egypt < white crown; *ntr* < god < star [compare: Sumerian *dingir* sign])
 - synecdoche
 - logograms, the rebus principle

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

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3. **2/9/26**

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4. **2/16/26**

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5. **2/23/26**

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6. **3/2/26**

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