

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

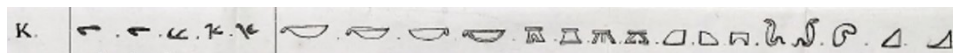


hwi.n=f h3=sn m inb pn r ifd nn iry m ifd

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.templetexte.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-Imn-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 *k*
 - class (*f* vs *d* snakes) and shape (*h* vs *r* signs) substitutions, synonymy
 - direct representation (viper leaving/entering box; feather-wearing crocodile; “colorful of feathers, who comes forth from the horizon”)
 - antonomasia (*ntr* ʕ < 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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- example derivations of “new” readings:
 - *m3ʕ.(t)-hrw* < “wreath of justification” < Gardiner M2
 - *Imn* < *n m iw* (Gaudard 2010), *i m n* (Sethe 1993), *im + n* (Fairman 1943)
 - *dd*, e.g., in the name *Dd-hr* < *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
- *iwʕ n ntr.wy pri.wy* < “heir of the manifest gods” < heir of Πτολεμαῖος Ἐπιφανῆς Εὐχάριστος < heir of *Ptolemaĩos 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”
- *B3k.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.
- *sḥm ʕnh Imn*, “living image of Amun”, is a Ptolemaic evocation of the New Kingdom *Tw.t-ʕnh-Imn* (!)
- the *nty* in *ʕhʕy nty ʕ3.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*, “male, 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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- How to identify when *iw* is marking the circumstantial first present? Sometimes, can tell from whether the surrounding text has more ME or more LE characteristics.
- adverbial predicates can often occur with no introductory particle
- cartouches:
 - the Greek cult epithet usually appears outside, not inside, cartouches
 - within the birth-name cartouche of a Ptolemy, the name is often followed by the epithets *ʕnh d.t mry Pth*
 - within the throne-name cartouche, the name is often followed by *shm ʕnh Imn*
 - nearby the name of the ruler, one often finds epithets for the parent(s) of the ruler
- example use of epithets from the Rosetta Stone:



hnty n ny-sw.t bity Ptlmys ʕnh d.t mry Pth ntr pri nb nfr.w

statue of the king of upper and lower Egypt, Ptolemy, living forever, beloved of Ptah, the manifest god, lord of perfection

- [Kom Ombo: site of a Ptolemaic temple dedicated “dually” to Sobek and Haroeris (*Hr-wr*)]
- an oddity: they switch between *Sbk* and *Sbk-R* even in the same (columnar) text
- Aurelio: Would *kairos* (καῖρος) be an appropriate translation of *ʕ.t*?
- In the Getty and other places, they refer to Trajan as “Augustus Caesar”: but if you look at the actual cartouches, it’s Trajan with the *title* Autocrator Caesar
- last line of the Rosetta Stone:

[hti=tw] sh3wy pn hr ʕy nty ʕ.t rwd.(t) m sš n mdw.w-ntr

This decree should be engraved upon a stela of hard stone in hieroglyphs [“the writing of the gods’ words”].

- apart from the Rosetta Stone, most of the texts we’re reading in class are from temple walls, and occur as description of a (theological) scene
- common structure of a temple scene: the king gives an offering to a god; the god then promises some benefit to the king
- The Ptolemaic spellings of the 3rd-person masculine and feminine dependent pronouns often overlap: Why? Because by that point in time, *sw* and *sy* were being pronounced the same.

- infrequently, they use the LE dependent pronouns in place of the ME ones: $tw=i$, $tw=k$, $tw=t$, $tw=n$, $tw=tn$ in place of wi , tw , tn , n , tn
- Why is hpr spelled without the complementary r ? Because by that point in time, they were not pronouncing the r : They pronounced it *shope* [as in Coptic].

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- “When you see those winged [sun] disks everywhere in temples in Egypt, those are depictions of Horus of Edfu.”
- Monumental inscription sight-reading practice:



snd n šbk-R^c nb Nby.t ntr ʕ nb ḥw.t ḥnt

Have fear of Sobek-Re, lord of Ombos, great god, lord of the temple of the south.



*mi n ḥrw=i it=i Wsir
 ink s3=k ḥr m3^c ḥrw
 Wsir Wn-nfr m3^c ḥrw ntr ʕ ḥry ib Twn.t
 ḥtp ḥr=k nfr n ny-sw.t bity nb t3.wy ()|*

Come to my voice, my father, Osiris.

I am your son, Horus, true of voice.

Osiris Wennefer [“Perfect Being”], true of voice, great god who is in Dendera.

May your beautiful face be content with the dual king, the lord of the two lands, ()|.

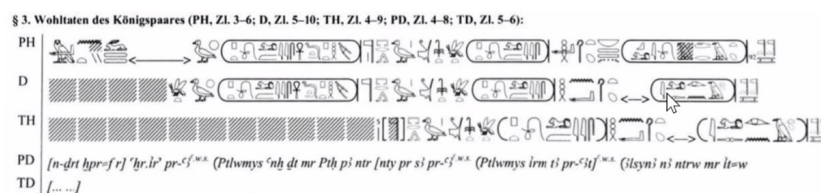
- LE $s\bar{d}m=f$ forms:
 - perfective $s\bar{d}m=f$: a.k.a, preterite, perfect
 - prospective $s\bar{d}m=f$: a.k.a., subjunctive

- ambiguity in the phrase *iw^c n ntr.wy pri.wy*: could be either Ptolemy VI or Ptolemy VIII, since they were brothers
- exercise: find *iw^c n ntr.wy pri.wy* in Urk. VIII, no. 76
- “The left eye will be joining the right eye”
- real example where the feminine 3rd-person dependent pronoun is spelled with *-w*, because the (semi)vowel is just not pronounced anymore:

sw m hm.t n 'Imn-R^c

She [not “he”] is the wife of Amun-Re.

- “They were supposed to write his mother’s name, but accidentally wrote his first wife’s name: Cleopatra [the First].” “They should all have been named Arsinoe.” “Right. Or Berenike... We have, what, seven Cleopatras...”



- very common in monumental captions:

dd mdw.(w) in [name of god]

speaking [infinitive] of word[s] by [name of god]

- in reference books: “Tableau” = an illustrated scene; “Titre et Formule” = the title caption
- *tw3 p.t* = “raising the sky [said of the king-as-Shu]”
- *mi n=k / n=t* = “take for yourself”
- the *hr / r* + infinitive construction:
 - in Ptolemaic writing [or LE], *hr* + ____ need not have progressive aspect
 - may be modified by preceding converters
 - may omit the *hr* or *r*, as they were no longer included in the spoken version
- in Ptolemaic, *iw=i*, *iw=k*, *iw=t*, etc. will just refer to the LE third future
- Coptic ⲙⲁ ⲙⲱⲧⲙ comes from Egyptian *hr sdm*, not *hr sdm*
- “Remember, if you’re Egyptian, you’re facing south. So ‘the West’ is to the right.”
- “[In the West], you could get attacked by Apophis; you have the damned who get their heads cut off every night...Of course, in the Christian era, the West is recast as the bad pagan place.”

5. 2/23/26

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6. 3/2/26

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7. 3/9/26

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8. 3/16/26

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