

Egyptian Writing

The main Egyptian writing system was **hieroglyphics** (hy-ruh-GLIF-iks). This system, which uses picture symbols to represent objects, sounds, and ideas, was one of the world's first writing systems. Archaeologists have found examples of Egyptian hieroglyphics that date back to about 3200 BC. Only Sumerian cuneiform is thought to be older.

The Egyptians most often used hieroglyphics for formal writing, such as you might find on stone monuments, and for religious texts. Hieroglyphics were difficult to learn and took time to compose. Once written, however, they were appreciated for their beauty. Written words were appreciated as an art form.

For texts that needed to be written more quickly, the Egyptians had two other writing systems. The first was called hieratic (hy-RA-tik), and it was used mostly for religious texts. The other system, demotic (di-MAH-tik), was used mainly for legal and literary writings after about 500 BC.

Both simpler and less attractive than hieroglyphics, hieratic and demotic writings were seldom carved into stone. Instead, writings were made on wood, leather, pottery, and papyrus (puh-PY-ruhs) sheets.

Papyrus is a reedy plant that grew along the Nile. The Egyptians used the pulp of the papyrus to make paperlike sheets. Once dried, these sheets provided an excellent writing surface. Because Egypt's climate is so dry, papyrus did not decompose quickly. Many papyrus scrolls are still readable after thousands of years.

For centuries after the decline of Egypt, no one could read Egyptian writing. Historians knew that the hieroglyphs they found in tombs were a form of writing, but they had no idea how to decipher it.

In 1799 a French soldier discovered a broken granite slab near the Nile Delta village of Rosetta. On this **Rosetta Stone**, as it came to be called, were long passages of ancient writing. In fact, the writing turned out to be the same text written in three different scripts: hieroglyphic, demotic, and ancient Greek. Using the Greek text as a guide, a French scholar managed to figure out the meaning of the hieroglyphs and of the demotic characters. This discovery unlocked the mystery of Egyptian writing, giving historians the key they needed to translate ancient texts.

World History: Human Legacy, Susan Elizabeth Ramírez et al., Holt

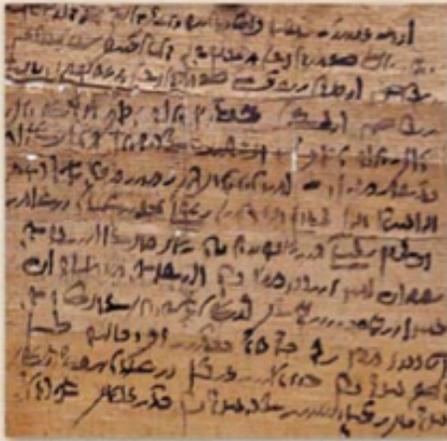
The Three Egyptian Scripts



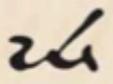
▲ Hieratic passage

◀ Hieroglyphic passage





▲ Demotic passage

Meaning	Hieroglyphic Symbol	Hieratic Symbol	Demotic Symbol
Fox skins tied together			
Stone jug			
Roll of papyrus	