

MIDDLE EGYPTIAN

Middle Egyptian introduces the reader to the writing system of ancient Egypt and the language of hieroglyphic texts. It contains twenty-six lessons, exercises (with answers), a list of hieroglyphic signs, and a dictionary. It also includes a series of twenty-five essays on the most important aspects of ancient Egyptian history, society, religion and literature. The combination of grammar lessons and cultural essays allows users not only to read hieroglyphic texts but also to understand them, providing the foundation for understanding texts on monuments and reading great works of ancient Egyptian literature in the original.

This second edition contains revised exercises and essays, providing an up-to-date account of current research and discoveries. New illustrations enhance discussions and examples. These additions combine with the previous edition to create a complete grammatical description of the classical language of ancient Egypt for specialists in linguistics and other fields.

James P. Allen is the Wilbour Professor of Egyptology at Brown University. He is a former curator of Egyptian art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and president of the International Association of Egyptologists. His previous publications include *Genesis in Egypt: the Philosophy of Ancient Egyptian Creation Accounts* (1989), *The Heqanakht Papyri* (2002), and *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (2005).

MIDDLE EGYPTIAN

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE OF HIEROGLYPHS

JAMES P. ALLEN

SECOND EDITION, REVISED



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James P. Allen

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PREFACE

The decipherment of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic writing is one of the great success stories of modern archeology. Before 1822, the civilization of ancient Egypt was mute and mysterious, its images bizarre and incomprehensible to a world convinced that all thought of any worth began with the ancient Greeks. Today we are able to read the ancient Egyptian texts and, more importantly, to understand for the most part what they meant to the people who wrote them. In the process we have discovered a world of rich imagination, sophisticated thought, and profoundly moving emotion.

Despite the remarkable achievement behind this discovery, however, the language of the ancient texts remains inaccessible to all but a handful of scholars. There are any number of good and widely available translations of ancient Egyptian texts, but the same cannot be said for studies of the Egyptian language itself. Those who want to be able to read the texts for themselves, to understand the inscriptions on monuments in Egypt or in museums, or simply to learn a fascinating ancient language for its own sake soon discover that this is no easy task. Though grammars of ancient Egyptian do exist, they are usually intended as reference works for specialists and are difficult for anyone but the most dedicated student to learn from. Most of them are also obsolete in some respects, reflecting an understanding of Egyptian grammar that is outdated or incomplete. A number of excellent grammars for the beginning student have appeared in recent years, but these are generally in languages other than English or are not easily accessible.

The present book has been written to address this shortcoming. It is designed to be usable by interested nonspecialists who want to learn Egyptian on their own as well as by students following a course of professional instruction. Its lessons and exercises offer a solid foundation in Middle Egyptian, the language of most hieroglyphic inscriptions and the classical speech of ancient Egyptian literature.

Learning Egyptian presents a number of problems not encountered in studying most other languages. The culture of ancient Egypt differs from our own in more than just its language. Its texts are full of terms and concepts that have no direct counterpart in the modern world. To help you understand these, each grammatical lesson is also complemented by a short essay on some aspect of Egyptian society and thought. This foundation will make it possible for you not only to translate the hieroglyphic texts but also to understand what they have to say.

Ancient Egyptian is a dead language, and our knowledge of it is restricted to the limited number of texts that have managed to survive. We learn Egyptian, therefore, not as a means of communication but as a tool for reading those texts. The purpose of this book is to enable you to understand the grammar and content of Middle Egyptian texts and not—or only accidentally—to teach you

how to write your own Egyptian sentences. The exercises in each lesson and the accompanying dictionary in the back of the book therefore go in one direction only, from Egyptian to English.

As you will discover in the course of the first few lessons, the hieroglyphic writing system does not represent very well what Middle Egyptian was like as a spoken language. For this reason, we cannot usefully approach ancient Egyptian as we might other languages, learning the grammar through phrases and sentences designed around the scenarios of everyday life. Because hieroglyphs usually do not reveal the actual form of a word, we cannot rely just on the written form to tell us what a word means. We also have to pay close attention to syntax: how words are put together into the phrases and sentences of Egyptian texts.

In learning Middle Egyptian, therefore, we also need to learn the mechanics of syntax—concepts such as predicates, adverbial modifiers, and subordinate clauses. Experience has shown that beginning students often find these concepts a major hurdle to learning Egyptian—and conversely, once they are understood, a significant aid to reading Egyptian texts. For that reason, the lessons in this book devote a good deal of time to the discussion of syntax. Grammatical terms are defined when they are first introduced, and syntactic constructions are illustrated with examples from English as well as Egyptian. This approach should make it possible for you to perceive syntax as less of a barrier and more of a tool in your efforts to learn Middle Egyptian.

Studies of Egyptian syntax have been dominated historically by two major schools of grammatical theory. The present book subscribes to neither of these exclusively. The emphasis in these lessons is on a practical approach to recognizing Egyptian forms and constructions, using terms and analyses from both schools of thought together with more recent advances in our understanding of how the language works. Discussions of grammatical theory are relegated to the final lesson, where you can evaluate their usefulness on the basis of what you have learned.

This book is the result of more than two decades of thinking about the most effective way to present Egyptian grammar to beginning students, coupled with practical application in the classroom. I am grateful to the faithful corps of students who have patiently endured six years of instruction and reading Middle Egyptian texts with me in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Beatrice Cooper (who laboriously proofread the lessons and checked every cross-reference in them, thereby saving me from innumerable errors), Charles Herzer, Anne and David Mininberg, Howard Schlossman, and Elinor Smith. Their dedicated efforts have shown me the benefits of some approaches as well as the impracticality of others, and this book in its present form is in large part a tribute to their continued interest and comments.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to those who have supported and encouraged my interest in Egyptian grammar, in particular Dr. Dorothea Arnold, Lila Acheson Wallace Curator and Chair of the Metropolitan Museum's Department of Egyptian Art, and Prof. William Kelly Simpson, of Yale University. Above all, I am grateful to the unwavering commitment and support of my wife, Susan J. Allen. Without her, this book could not have been written.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

The reception accorded the first edition of this book, published in 2000, has far exceeded expectations, both in the world of Egyptology and among the general public. The extent to which the book has been adopted for classroom use and self-instruction, however, has also revealed a number of shortcomings that this new edition is meant to address. Chief among these are errata, now hopefully all corrected. The essays have been updated and enhanced with illustrations and the addendum on month names in Lesson 9 has been expanded and incorporated into the lesson itself. References no longer occupy a separate section at the back and now accompany the examples cited in the text itself; as in the first edition, they use standard abbreviations and are meant primarily as aids to Egyptologists. Because the purpose of the examples is to illustrate grammatical points, I have sometimes emended hieroglyphic spellings and restored missing text for the sake of clarity; the professional user is therefore cautioned to consult the referenced publication rather than citing directly from the hieroglyphic text as presented here.

I am grateful to Cambridge University Press for the opportunity to make these changes, and I hope that they will make the book even more useful than its first incarnation.