1. LANGUAGE AND WRITING

1.1   Family

Egyptian is the ancient and original language of Egypt. It belongs to the language family known as Afro–Asiatic or Hamito-Semitic and is related to both of that family's branches: North African languages such as Berber and Beja, and Asiatic languages such as Arabic, Ethiopic, and Hebrew. Within Afro–Asiatic, Egyptian is unique. It has features that are common to both branches, although it is closer to the African side of the family.

1.2   History

Egyptian first appeared in writing shortly before 3200 BC and remained a living language until the eleventh century AD.[1] Beginning with the Muslim conquest of Egypt in AD 641, Arabic gradually replaced Egyptian as the dominant language in Egypt. Today, the language of Egypt is Arabic. Egyptian is a dead language, like Latin, which can only be studied in writing, though it is still spoken in the rituals of the Coptic (Egyptian Christian) Church.

Throughout its long lifetime, Egyptian underwent tremendous changes. Scholars classify its history into two phases and five major stages:

Earlier Egyptian

1) **Old Egyptian** is the first stage of the language. Although Egyptian writing is first attested before 3200 BC, these early inscriptions (called Archaic Egyptian) consist only of names and labels. Old Egyptian proper is dated from approximately 2700 BC, when the first extensive texts appeared, until about 2100 BC.

2) **Middle Egyptian** (or Classical Egyptian) is closely related to Old Egyptian. First attested around 2100 BC, it survived as a spoken language for some five hundred years but remained the standard hieroglyphic language for the rest of ancient Egyptian history. Middle Egyptian is the phase of the language discussed in this book.

Later Egyptian

3) **Late Egyptian** began to replace Middle Egyptian as the spoken language after 1600 BC, and it remained in use until about 600 BC. Though descended from Old and Middle Egyptian, Late Egyptian differed substantially from the earlier phases, particularly in grammar. Traces of Late Egyptian can be found in texts earlier than 1600 BC, but it did not appear as a full written language until after 1300 BC.

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1   Some scholars prefer BCE and CE rather than BC and AD. Because both conventions use the same benchmark (see Essay 9), however, this book retains the older system.

4) **Demotic** developed out of Late Egyptian. It first appeared around 650 BC and survived until the fifth century AD.

5) **Coptic** is the name given to the final stage of ancient Egyptian, which is closely related to Demotic. It appeared at the end of the first century AD and was spoken for nearly a thousand years thereafter. The last known texts written by native speakers of Coptic date to the eleventh century AD.

1.3   Dialects

Egyptian also had several dialects. These regional differences in speech and writing are best attested in Coptic, which had five major dialects. They can only be partly detected in the writing of earlier phases of Egyptian, but they undoubtedly existed then as well: a letter from about 1200 BC complains that a correspondent's language is as incomprehensible as that of a northern Egyptian speaking with an Egyptian from the south. The southern dialect of Coptic, known as Saidic, was the classical form; the northern one, called Bohairic, is the dialect used in Coptic Church services today.

1.4   Hieroglyphs

The basic writing system of ancient Egyptian consisted of about five hundred common signs, known as hieroglyphs. The term "hieroglyph" comes from two Greek words meaning "sacred carvings," which are a translation, in turn, of the Egyptians' own name for their writing system, "the god's speech." Each sign in this system is a hieroglyph, and the system as a whole is called hieroglyphic (*not* "hieroglyphics").

Unlike Mesopotamian cuneiform or Chinese, whose beginnings can be traced over several hundred years, hieroglyphic writing seems to appear in Egypt suddenly, around 3250 BC, as a complete system. Scholars are divided in their opinions about its origins. Some suggest that the earlier, developmental stages of hieroglyphic were written on perishable materials, such as wood, and simply have not survived. Others argue that the system could have been invented all at once by an unknown genius. Although it was once thought that the idea of writing came to Egypt from Mesopotamia, recent discoveries indicate that writing arose independently in Egypt.

People since the ancient Greeks have tried to understand this system as a mystical encoding of secret wisdom, but hieroglyphic is no more mysterious than any other system that has been used to record language. Basically, **hieroglyphic is nothing more than the way the ancient Egyptians wrote their language**. To read hieroglyphic, therefore, you have to learn the Egyptian language.

1.5   Hieroglyphic spelling

Each hieroglyph is a picture of a thing that existed in the world or imagination of the ancient Egyptians: for instance, the ground plan of a simple house (⌷), a human mouth (⟺), or a pair of legs in motion (𓂻). These could be used to write the words

that they depicted, or related words: for example, ▢ "house"; ⩘ "come." When a hiero-glyph is used in this manner, it is called an **ideogram** ("idea writing"). We still use ideograms, even in English: for example, "I ♥ my dog" or ☺.

Writing with ideograms is simple and direct, but it is pretty much limited to things that can be pictured. All languages, however, also contain many words for things that cannot be conveyed by a simple picture. Successful writing systems must find a way to express those ideas as well. Most written languages do so by a system of signs that represent not things but the sounds of the language. This allows their writers to "spell out" words. A sign used in this way is called a **phonogram** ("sound writing"). English writing uses phonograms: each letter in our alphabet is a symbol that represents a sound rather than an object of the real world.

The idea that symbols could be used to represent the sounds of a language rather than objects is one of the most important, and ancient, of all human discoveries. It is often called "the rebus principle." A rebus is a message spelled out in pictures that repre-sent sounds rather than the things they are pictures of: for example, the pictures of an eye (⌐), a bee (🐝), and a leaf (🍃) can be put together as the English rebus ⌐🐝🍃, meaning "I believe" ("eye–bee–leaf")—which has nothing to do with eyes, bees, or leaves. The hieroglyphic system used this principle too. Many Egyptian hieroglyphs could be used not only as ideograms, but also as phonograms. For example, the signs for "house" (▢) and "mouth" (⌐) were also used as phonograms in the word ▢⌐ ,,, "seed," which has nothing to do with houses or mouths.

In Middle Egyptian, many words spelled with phonograms have an ideogram added at the end. This extra sign, traditionally called a **determinative**, has two functions: it shows that the signs preceding it are to be read as phonograms rather than ideograms, and it is a classifier that indicates the general idea of the word. For example, the words ▢⌐ ,,, "seed" and ▢⌐⩘ "emergence" are distinguished by their determinatives ,,, (seeds) and ⩘ (walking legs).

To summarize: the individual pictures of the Egyptian hieroglyphic writing system are used in three different ways:

1) as **ideograms**, to represent the things they actually depict: for example, ▢ "house" and ⌐ "mouth."

2) as **phonograms**, to represent the sounds that "spell out" individual words: for ex-ample, ▢⌐ "emerge." Used in this way, the hieroglyphs stand for sounds rather than for pictures of things.

3) as **determinatives**, to show that the signs preceding are meant as phonograms, and to indicate the general idea of the word: for example, the "walking legs" in ▢⌐⩘ "emerge."

All hieroglyphs have the potential to be used in each of these ways. In practice, however, their use was generally more restricted. Some occur mostly as ideograms or determinatives, others almost exclusively as phonograms. The "house" sign (□) is one of the few hieroglyphs that was regularly used in all three functions: as an ideogram, meaning "house"; as a phonogram, with the value *pr*; and as a determinative, after words denoting buildings.
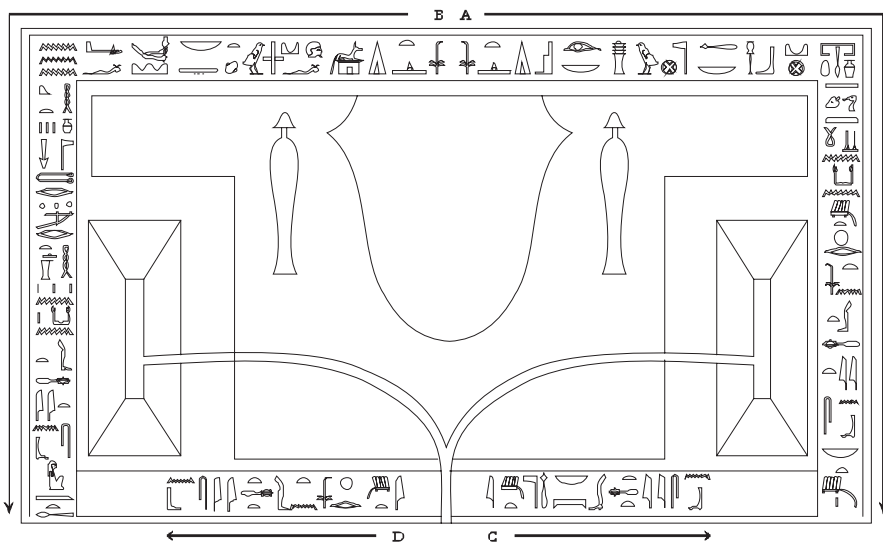
1.6   Direction

Unlike English, which is always written from left to right, and normally in horizontal rows, hieroglyphs could be written in four different directions:

in a horizontal row—left to right (□ ∧) or right to left (∧ □)

in a vertical column—left to right (□) or right to left (□).

This flexibility is a useful feature of hieroglyphic writing. Although they preferred to write right to left, the Egyptians often took advantage of it to produce symmetrical inscriptions. For example, on the offering-table pictured below (*Licht*, 54 fig. 53), one inscription begins at the top and runs down the right side (A), and a similar one faces it on the left (B); at the bottom, two shorter inscriptions (C and D) face each other the same way:

When hieroglyphs accompany images, they normally face in the same direction as the image they refer to. In the scene reproduced below (*Meir* V, pl. 18), the man on the left is a sculptor; on the right is the seated statue he is working on. Above the sculptor's head are two rows of hieroglyphs, facing right, which identify him as "Overseer of

sculpting, Itjau"; the three rows of hieroglyphs above the statue read "Statue of the courtier, overseer of priests, Henenit the Black," and they face left, like the statue itself.

Usually, signs with an obvious front and back (like 𓀀) face the *beginning* of their inscription, as they do in the illustrations above. The normal rule is to read "into" the signs: the lefthand inscriptions in these figures are read from right to left, and the righthand ones from left to right. Once in a while, however, this rule is reversed, and the signs face the *end* of the inscription; such inscriptions are called "retrograde," and are found almost exclusively in religious texts.

1.7   Groups

The words of hieroglyphic texts follow one after the other: in the scene reproduced above, for example, the three rows on the right contain, in order, the words "Statue of" (row 1), "courtier, overseer (of) priests" (row 2), and "Henenit (the) Black" (row 3) (the words in parentheses do not appear in the hieroglyphs). The signs that spell out these words, however, are arranged in groups, rather than one after the other like the letters of an English word.

This kind of organization is a fundamental principle of all hieroglyphic writing. The arrangement of the groups depends on the shape of the individual signs. In general, every hieroglyph has one of three basic shapes:

1)   tall signs: for example, 𓄿 and 𓀎 .

2)   flat signs: for example, 𓂋 and 𓈖 .

3)   small signs: for example, 𓏏 and 𓏤 .

Tall signs usually stand by themselves, but the other signs are normally arranged into
square or rectangular groups. In the name "Henenit the Black," for instance, the first
two tall signs stand alone, one after the other (𓎛𓈖); the next two, which are flat, are
arranged in a square (𓈖𓈖); the tall sign following stands alone (𓏏); and the last two
small signs are grouped in a rectangle with one above the other (𓏏𓏤). Sometimes a tall
sign can be made smaller and grouped with a flat one, as in 𓄂 "overseer" in the scene
above. When signs of dissimilar shapes are grouped, they are regularly centered, like the
hieroglyphs 𓈖 in the same scene. If a flat or small sign has to stand alone it is cen-
tered in the row, like the signs 𓂋 and 𓏏 in the lefthand inscription of the scene.

The groups of a hieroglyphic inscription are meant to be read from *beginning to
end* and from *top to bottom*. In the word 𓍑𓏏𓏤 "courtier," for example, the order is 𓍑 –
𓏏 – 𓂋 – 𓏏 – 𓏤 . Direction and grouping are the only organizing methods used in hi-
eroglyphic writing. Hieroglyphic texts do not separate the words by spaces, and there
are no punctuation marks. This makes hieroglyphic inscriptions difficult to read at first,
but with practice it will become easier to see the words rather than strings of signs—
justasyoucanreadthisstringoflettersbecauseyouknowenglish.

1.8   The uses of hieroglyphs

Hieroglyphic was used to write Old and Middle Egyptian. Although Middle Egyptian
ceased to be a spoken language by about 1600 BC, it remained in use in hieroglyphic
texts until the end of ancient Egyptian history. Most hieroglyphic inscriptions are
found on the walls of ancient Egyptian temples, obelisks, and tombs, or on objects
such as statues, offering tables, coffins, sarcophagi (stone coffins), and stelae (inscribed
slabs of stone or wood, like modern gravestones). In these places the texts can serve as
labels (as in the scene above) or dedications (as on the offering-table above); they can
also record the speech of the participants in a scene. Longer hieroglyphic inscriptions
are usually historical or autobiographical texts, or religious texts such as hymns and
funerary spells.

Hieroglyphs were normally carved into stone, wood, or ivory, or painted on plaster.
Because all hieroglyphic signs are individual pictures, the ancient sculptors and painters
often took as much care in making them as they did with the other elements of a scene,
such as the figures of animals, people, or gods. Sometimes, however, the artists carved
or painted only the outline of each sign; this is particularly true in long hieroglyphic
texts.

1.9   Cursive hieroglyphs and hieratic

Besides carving or painting inscriptions, the ancient Egyptians also wrote texts with a reed brush and ink on papyrus, leather, or wood. In these handwritten texts it is very rare to find hieroglyphs made with the same detail as those in hieroglyphic inscriptions. Such documents employed a much simpler form of each sign, called **cursive hieroglyphic**. Here is a sample of cursive writing, on the left, with the same text reproduced in regular hieroglyphs next to it (CT IV, 255b–257a T1Be):

Cursive hieroglyphic inscriptions are usually written from right to left in columns, like the sample above, and are found almost exclusively in religious texts such as the "Book of the Dead."

For handwritten texts, the Egyptians used an even more cursive style of writing, which the ancient Greeks called **hieratic** ("priestly"). Hieratic is almost as old as hieroglyphic itself. The relationship between hieratic and hieroglyphic is the same as that between our handwriting and printing. Like cursive hieroglyphs, each hieratic sign has a hieroglyphic counterpart, although these are not always as self-evident in hieratic as they are in cursive hieroglyphs. Here is a sample hieratic text, with the corresponding hieroglyphs transcribed below it (Ptahhotep 277–78):

Like cursive hieroglyphs, hieratic was written with a reed brush and ink, usually on papyrus. It is always written from right to left. Originally, hieratic could be written in either rows or columns; after about 1800 BC, however, columns were used only in religious texts, and all other hieratic texts were written in rows.

Hieratic was used to write Old, Middle, and Late Egyptian. For Old and Middle Egyptian it served as an alternative means of writing alongside hieroglyphic. The two scripts were used for different kinds of documents: hieroglyphic for formal texts meant to be permanent, such as tomb and temple inscriptions, and hieratic usually for more temporary texts, such as letters and accounts. Hieratic texts often reflect the contemporary colloquial language more closely than hieroglyphic, particularly after about 1600 BC; Late Egyptian is written almost exclusively in hieratic.

1.10   Demotic

Late Egyptian hieratic writing became more cursive and abbreviated as time went on, particularly in administrative documents. Eventually, it developed into the script we call **Demotic** (from the Greek for "popular"). Here is an example of Demotic writing (Erichsen, *Lesestücke* I, 73):
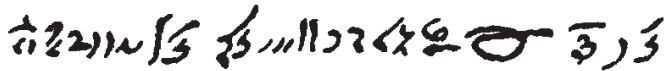
The term "Demotic" is used to refer to both writing and language: the phase of Egyptian known as Demotic is written only in the Demotic script. Since Demotic developed out of hieratic, it is even farther removed from hieroglyphic, and it is almost impossible to recognize the hieroglyphic ancestors of Demotic signs. For this reason, scholars do not usually transliterate Demotic writing into hieroglyphs; instead, they transcribe it into English letters (see Lesson 2): the transcription of the text above reads *ḏd.f n.w m-jr ḫsf t3 ntj jw.y ḏd.s ḏd.w p3y.n nb ꜥ3*.

The first Demotic texts appeared around 650 BC. From then on, Demotic was the normal means of writing Egyptian; hieratic, like cursive hieroglyphic, was kept only for religious manuscripts (hence its name "priestly"); and hieroglyphic was used in monumental inscriptions. Like hieratic, Demotic was mostly written with a brush and ink on papyrus. Toward the end of Egyptian civilization, however, only priests were still able to read hieroglyphic writing; inscriptions that were meant to have a larger audience were carved in Demotic instead. The Rosetta Stone, which records a decree issued in 196 BC to honor the pharaoh Ptolemy V, is inscribed in hieroglyphic (the sacred script of the priesthood that issued the decree), Demotic (the normal Egyptian script), and Greek (the native language of the Ptolemaic pharaohs).

1.11   Coptic

The Egyptians who adopted Christianity, after the first century AD, began to translate the sacred scriptures of this new religion into their own language, but they were reluctant to use the Demotic script for that purpose because of its association with the older, "pagan" religion. Instead, they wrote their sacred texts in the letters of the Greek al-

phabet. This script is called **Coptic**, the same term used for the Egyptian branch of Christianity. The Coptic alphabet has thirty-two letters: twenty-four taken from Greek, seven for sounds that Egyptian had but Greek did not, and one monogram (one letter standing for two). Here is a sample of Coptic writing (with the words separated), and its equivalent in English letters:

ΠΕΝΕΙⲰⲦ	ⲈⲦⳈⲚⲘⲠⲎⲨⲈ	ⲘⲀⲢⲈⲠⲈⲔⲢⲀⲚ	ⲞⲨⲞⲠ
peneiōt	ethnmpēue	marepekran	ouop

These are the first words of the Christian "Lord's Prayer" ("Our-father, who-(is)-in-the-skies, may-your-name-be holy"). For more on the Coptic alphabet, see § 2.5.

Like "Demotic," the term "Coptic" refers to a phase of the Egyptian language as well as a system of writing. As Egypt became increasingly Christian, the older writing systems were relegated to the texts and temples of the old religion. By the end of the fifth century AD, Coptic had become the only means of writing Egyptian, for secular and religious (Christian) texts alike. It remained in use until the death of the language itself, some six centuries later.

1.12   Decipherment

After the introduction of Coptic, the four ancient Egyptian scripts—hieroglyphic, hieratic, Demotic, and Coptic—existed side by side for about two hundred years. Hieratic died out sometime in the third century AD, the last hieroglyphic inscription was carved in AD 394, and the last known text in Demotic dates to AD 452. Thereafter, even though Egyptian continued to be spoken and written (in Coptic), the knowledge of the earlier writing systems was lost.

The earliest attempt to recover this lost knowledge probably dates from the fourth century AD, slightly before the last known ancient texts were inscribed. This was a work called *Hieroglyphica* ("Hieroglyphics"), supposedly written by an Egyptian named Horapollo and translated into Greek (the earliest copy of it dates to the fifteenth century AD). There is reason to believe that the author had some knowledge of hieroglyphic, but his explanation of the system is purely allegorical—perhaps because it was intended for a Greek audience, who had long believed in the mystical symbolism of hieroglyphs. He explains, for example, that the word for "son" is written with a goose because geese love their offspring more than any other animal does. The picture of a goose (𓅬) is in fact used to write the word "son," but only as a phonogram (because one word for "goose" had the same sound as the word for "son"); it is also used as a phonogram in other words that have nothing to do with either geese or offspring.

Horapollo's allegorical explanations were highly influential, and his approach dominated attempts at decipherment for the next fourteen centuries. Only with the work of Athanasius Kircher, in the mid-seventeenth century, did scholars begin to think that
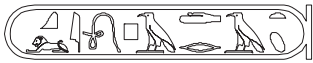
hieroglyphs could represent sounds as well as ideas. Kircher knew Coptic, and he also had the inspired notion that this last phase of Egyptian might be somehow related to the language of the hieroglyphs. But Kircher also believed in the mystical nature of the ancient script, and this eventually doomed to failure all his attempts at decipherment.

It was not until the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, in 1799, that scholars were able to make practical use of Kircher's ideas. For the first time they had a hieroglyphic text (on the top third of the stone) that had an undisputed translation into a known language (Greek, on the stone's bottom third). Scholars in several countries worked on the new text and succeeded in identifying many of the hieroglyphic groups with words in the Greek translation. But the final breakthrough eluded all of them except one, a young French schoolteacher named Jean-François Champollion.

From the work of two of his contemporaries, the Swede Johan Åkerblad and the Englishman Thomas Young, Champollion suspected that some hieroglyphic signs might be read phonetically. He began compiling a list of such signs by studying royal names, which could easily be identified by the "cartouche" (name-ring) surrounding them. The cartouches on the Rosetta Stone all corresponded to the name of the pharaoh Ptolemy V (210–180 BC) in the Greek text:

$$\text{(cartouche)} = \text{ΠΤΟΛΕΜΑΙΟΣ (Ptolemaios).}$$

Using this as a starting point, Champollion next looked at the cartouches on an obelisk whose base had been inscribed with Greek texts honoring another Ptolemy and two queens named Cleopatra. Here he found the same cartouche along with another, which he identified as the name "Cleopatra":

$$\text{(cartouche)} = \text{ΚΛΕΟΠΑΤΡΑ (Kleopatra).}$$

Both cartouches had some of the same signs, and by their position in the two names he was able to identify them as p ▢, t ⌒, o 𓎟, and l 𓃭. With these he was able to assign values to most of the other signs as well: m ▭, i 𓇋𓇋, s 𓊪, e 𓇋, a 𓄿, t ⌒, and r ⌒.

This convinced Champollion that hieroglyphs could be used alphabetically, at least for foreign names, though he still believed that they could also be read symbolically. The real breakthrough came when he began working on a cartouche with the signs 𓇳𓄟𓋴𓋴. From his previous work, Champollion was able to recognize the last two signs as s. Seeking a value for the first symbol, he thought of the sun and the Coptic word for "sun," $r\bar{e}$. This gave him $r\bar{e}$–…–s–s and immediately reminded him of the name Ramesses, which was known from a list of pharaonic names in a Greek history of Egypt written around 300 BC. Champollion then noticed the sign 𓄟 in a hieroglyphic group on the Rosetta Stone corresponding to the word for "birth" in the Greek text.