

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN PHONOLOGY

In *Ancient Egyptian Phonology*, James P. Allen studies the sounds of the language spoken by the ancient Egyptians. Using the internal evidence of the language, he proceeds from individual vowels and consonants to the sound of actual ancient Egyptian texts. Allen also explores variants, alternants, and the development of sound in texts, and touches on external evidence from Afroasiatic cognate languages. The most up-to-date work on this topic, *Ancient Egyptian Phonology* is an essential resource for Egyptologists and will also be of interest to scholars and linguists of African and Semitic languages.

James P. Allen is the Charles Edwin Wilbour Professor of Egyptology at Brown University. A scholar of ancient Egyptian language and thought, he is the author of *Middle Egyptian: An Introduction to the Language and Culture of Hieroglyphs* and *The Ancient Egyptian Language: An Historical Study*. Since 2010 he has been one of the leading scholars in a complete re-evaluation of the grammar as well as the phonology of the language.

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PREFACE

The study of the ancient Egyptian language is comparable in some ways to paleontology. Except for Coptic, the remnants of the language survive in skeletal form, like the bones of dinosaurs, and our attempts to understand the living language is like the efforts of paleontologists to understand dinosaurs by rearticulating their skeletons and studying whatever clues are left of their behavior.

The first paleontologists, in the nineteenth century, were not always certain how the bones went together. They also thought that dinosaurs belonged to the lizard family, and that belief endured into the twentieth century, governing the understanding and analysis of the creatures. It turns out to be true, but not for all dinosaurs. A significant group of them – theropods, including the *Tyrannosaurus rex* – were ornithoids, the ancestors of birds.

In Egyptology, the analogy to 19th-century paleontology is the analysis of ancient Egyptian as a Semitic language. The first Egyptologists were trained in Semitic languages and naturally understood the newly deciphered addition to the Afro-Asiatic family from that perspective. Phonology, as well as grammar, is

the heir to that tradition: for example, the transcription of 𓆎 as *i*—“sometimes /j/ and sometimes /ʲ/”—and of 𓆏 as *ʒ*—“strong /ʒ/.”¹ The Semitic viewpoint persists, and not just as tradition: the most influential study of Egyptian phonology in the past half-century has been the 1971 article of a Semitist, Otto Rössler, “Das Ägyptische als semitische Sprache.”

To be fair, the early Egyptologists had few clues as to the nature of the language. It was only natural for Semiticists to see traces of Asiatic languages in its features, just as those trained in African languages have sometimes recognized non-Semitic traits. Unfortunately, experts in Afroasiatic linguistics have often made questionable analyses because their knowledge of Egyptian has been based on dictionaries and studies rather than the first-hand knowledge that would allow them to make informed judgments, and the same is true for Egyptologists looking for cognates, whose knowledge of Afroasiatic linguistics is generally superficial at best.

In our passion to articulate and reconstruct the hieroglyphic skeleton, we have forgotten that correspondence is not the same as identity. The fact that Arabic speakers heard ancient Greek Πτολεμαῖος as *batlaimūs* بطليموس does not reveal that Greek τ was an “emphatic” consonant like Arabic ط *t̤*. To assess the true value of τ, we have to look at its place within the ancient Greek phonological system. The same is

1 Slant marks (/x/) enclose phonemes.

true for ancient Egyptian phonology. Although ancient Egyptian *dwn* “stretch” is cognate with Arabic طول *tūl* “length,” for example, that is not necessarily justification for interpreting Egyptian *d* as an “emphatic” dental or Egyptian *n* as [l], any more than the cognate relationship of Spanish *jungla* with English *jungle* means that the two *j*’s necessarily represent the same sort of consonant.

In assessing the features of ancient Egyptian phonology, primary weight must be given to internal evidence: the variants, alternants, and developments of a sound within the language itself, insofar as they can be traced, before external evidence is brought to bear. The present study is an attempt to do just that. With respect to the external evidence of Afroasiatic cognates, I claim no specific expertise, and I fully realize that some of my conclusions may be called into question by those with more knowledge and experience in Afroasiatic linguistics than I. With respect to Egyptian, however, I am fully convinced of the validity of both the method and the conclusions adopted in this book. Some of the latter are different from what I advocated in my 2013 study, *The Ancient Egyptian Language: An Historical Study*. That is at it should be. Scholarship, like science, needs to be open to new ideas and new conclusions.

The overriding principle in this study is that the Egyptian evidence must be looked at for itself, and not as a simulacrum of other languages. We cannot appreciate Egyptian art if we

view it as a primitive version of Renaissance painting, or Egyptian grammar if we look for equivalents of the tenses and moods of Western languages. In our efforts to see the reality behind the skeleton of the hieroglyphic writing system, we must realize that its skin might turn out to be not the scales of lizards, but the feathers of birds.

This book is partly the result of a graduate seminar on the topic that I led at Brown in the Spring semester of 2018. I am grateful to its students, Vicky Almansa, Julia Puglisi (Harvard), and Silvia Štubňová, for their insights, which helped me refine some of my own. I am especially grateful to Christian Casey for reading parts of this book and debating most of it with me, and to Andréas Stauder, for reviewing and amending my original manuscript. The present version is the better for their input.

I offer this study as one hopeful step in advancing the understanding of both Egyptian itself and its true place within the larger Afroasiatic family of languages.