

# Language and Education in Ancient Egypt

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## 1 Language in Ancient Egypt

In addition to well-known treasures from ancient Egypt, such as the pyramids of Giza and the tomb of Tutankhamun, the dryness of the Egyptian climate has preserved many other items of historical importance which would not have survived in such good condition elsewhere in the world. Amongst these is a wealth of written material, on papyrus, wood, linen, and potsherds, as well as inscriptions carved on the walls of temples, tombs, and stone artefacts. The ancient Egyptians were great believers in the importance of the written word, education and learning, and the decipherment of the Egyptian hieroglyphs in the nineteenth century opened up another very valuable source of information about the ancient civilization along the River Nile.

The earliest form of Egyptian writing dates from the Archaic Period, c. 3200 BC, and has been found on pottery, and on ivory and wooden labels attached to items buried in the tombs of the predynastic kings at Abydos. The hieroglyphs at this stage were simple signs indicating the contents of the containers in which the various grave goods were buried<sup>1</sup>.

The Narmer Palette is regarded as the earliest historical document from ancient Egypt, but the historical record is chiefly deduced from the scenes carved on the two sides of the palette, as the few hieroglyphs on the object give only the name of the king written in a serekh (a rectangular shape representing the façade of the royal palace)<sup>2</sup>. Simple sentences then began to develop. One of the first examples of this grouping of words can be seen on the sandal label of King Den, now in the British Museum, where signs at the right of the label are translated as, "First time of smiting the east"<sup>3</sup>.

The ancient Egyptian language was written in three scripts which evolved during the four millennia of the ancient civilization. The earliest script was the hieroglyphic form which developed during the Archaic Period and Old Kingdom. The cursive hieratic script appeared only slightly later, and demotic, an even more cursive form, was in use from about 700 BC. Increasingly, from the Old Kingdom onwards, the hieroglyphic script was used for historical and religious inscriptions carved on the walls of temples and tombs, and hieratic was used for documents concerned with daily life, such as business transactions, record

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1 G. Dreyer, *Umm el-Qaab I, Das prädynastische Königsgrab U-j und seine frühen Schriftzeugnisse*, AV 86 (Mainz, 1998); D. B. Redford ed., 'Scripts' in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* (American University in Cairo Press, 2001), Vol. 3, p. 192 ff.; V. Davies, *Egyptian Hieroglyphs* (London, 1987).

2 M. Saleh and H. Sourouzian, *The Egyptian Museum Cairo: Official Catalogue* (Mainz, 1987), No. 8; T. Wilkinson, *Early Dynastic Egypt* (London, 2001), p. 3, and see Index, p. 408.

3 A. J. Spencer, *Early Egypt: The Rise of Civilisation in the Nile Valley* (London, 1993), p. 89 and Fig. 67.

keeping, and correspondence, as well as religious texts, which were written on papyrus, potsherds, and other materials. The extremely cursive script known as demotic, literally 'of the people', largely replaced hieratic for everyday use from the seventh century BC onwards<sup>4</sup>.

The last stage of the ancient Egyptian language, Coptic, was written in the Greek script with seven additional letters, the earliest examples dating from the first century AD<sup>5</sup>.

The discovery of the Rosetta Stone in 1799 by an officer in Napoleon's army carrying out repairs to the Fortress of St. Julien in Rosetta, northern Egypt, was the turning point in the quest to decipher Egyptian hieroglyphs<sup>6</sup>. The Rosetta Stone is part of a granodiorite stela, which has carved on it a copy of the so-called 'Memphite Decree,' a decree proclaimed by Ptolemy V Epiphanes at his coronation in 196 BC, concerning the granting of certain privileges to the priesthood<sup>7</sup>. The stela was possibly originally set up in the temple of Neith at Sais (modern Sa el-Hagar), and reused in the building of the Fortress of Sultan Qaitbay (AD 1468-1495), which was renamed the Fortress of St. Julien by the French, near the town of Rosetta (modern Rashid). The value of the stone lies in the fact that the inscription is carved in three scripts and two languages. The first and second versions are in the ancient Egyptian language in hieroglyphs and demotic, while the third version is in Greek, written in the Greek script, which enabled scholars to obtain the wording of the decree, and provided an important tool for the comparison of groups of signs in the other two scripts.

Since medieval times, scholars of different nationalities had attempted to explain and translate the hieroglyphs, but by then the basic principles of the ancient language and the scripts in which it was written had been lost<sup>8</sup>. The most thorough research which led to the decipherment of the hieroglyphs was undertaken in the early nineteenth century by the English physicist, Thomas Young, and the French scholar, Jean-Francois Champollion<sup>9</sup>. Although Champollion is usually credited with succeeding in the decipherment, Young had carried out much valuable research which he shared with the Frenchman, but whereas Young had many other scientific interests in which he was involved, Champollion dedicated himself to understanding the Egyptian hieroglyphs, and was the first scholar to conclude correctly that the hieroglyphic script included both phonetic and picture signs. He announced his discoveries in a lecture given at the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres in Paris in September 1822<sup>10</sup>.

The decipherment was based on the comparison of the positions of signs and groups of signs with the Greek version, which had already provided the meaning of the inscription. The cartouche of Ptolemy

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4 Redford ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, Vol. 3, p. 192 ff.: S. Quirke and J. Spencer, *The British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt* (London, 1992), pp. 118-147.

5 Quirke and Spencer, *British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt*, pp. 120-121, pp.124-5 and Fig. 98; Redford ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, Vol. 3, p. 195.

6 R. Parkinson, *The Rosetta Stone* (London, 2005).

7 Parkinson, *Rosetta Stone*, pp. 57-60.

8 Quirke and Spencer, *British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt*, p. 124.

9 Parkinson, *Rosetta Stone*, pp. 33-46; L. and R. Adkins, *The Keys of Egypt* (London, 2001).

10 Parkinson, *Rosetta Stone*, p. 43.

occurs several times in the inscription, and comparison of this with royal cartouches in the inscription from the base of an obelisk from the island of Philae, provided the cartouche of Cleopatra (in this case the wife of Ptolemy VIII), as the two names share the letters p, o, t, e and a. Further intense study and comparison with other bi-lingual texts and hieroglyphic inscriptions verified Champollion's assumptions<sup>11</sup>.

An alphabet of twenty-two Egyptian hieroglyphs has been established, consisting of signs representing one letter, although there were also bi-consonantal signs representing two letters, tri-consonantal signs representing three letters, and a few representing four letters. In common with other Semitic languages, ancient Egyptian did not write full vowels<sup>12</sup>. At the end of the word there was a determinative, or ideogram, which indicated the meaning of the word, and was especially useful where words with different meanings were written with the same signs<sup>13</sup>.

Hieroglyphs could be written from left to right, right to left, and from top to bottom (rarely from bottom to top), although hieratic and demotic were usually written horizontally and always from right to left<sup>14</sup>.

Ancient Egyptian grammar consisted of many linguistic elements found in modern languages; verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, singular, plural, masculine, feminine, tenses of the verb, and so forth. The basic word order in sentences was verb-subject-object, or verb-subject-preposition-noun<sup>15</sup>.

Numerals were written with strokes, or digits for numbers up to 9, and specific signs for ten, a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, a hundred thousand and a million, the sign being repeated for the quantity required<sup>16</sup>.

From the Old Kingdom onwards, the names of kings and queens were written in an oval shape known today as a 'cartouche.' The shape was derived from the hieroglyphic symbol for the word (*šn*), 'to encircle' (a loop of rope), indicating that the king was ruler of 'all that the sun encircles.' If the king's name included that of a god, for example Tutankhamun, or Ramesses, the god's name was always written first in the cartouche<sup>17</sup>.

Nowadays, a hieroglyphic inscription can be a useful tool in reconstructing a damaged wall in an ancient tomb or temple, as the horizontal or vertical lines of the inscription can confirm tentative assemblies put together through other criteria.

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11 Parkinson, *Rosetta Stone*, p. 36 ff.; Adkins, *The Keys of Egypt*, 173 ff.

12 A. H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, 3rd edition (Oxford, 1969), p. 9 and p. 27 ff.; J. P. Allen, *Middle Egyptian* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 14-17 and pp. 23-34.

13 Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, pp. 30-34; Allen, *Middle Egyptian*, p. 3 and p. 28.

14 Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, p. 25; Allen, *Middle Egyptian*, pp. 3-5.

15 Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*; Allen, *Middle Egyptian*; M. Collier and B. Manley, *How To Read Hieroglyphs*, (London, 1998); R. O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford, 1962).

16 Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, p. 191 ff.

17 Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, p. 74.

## 2 Education in Ancient Egypt

The ancient Egyptians valued education very highly, and it was the first step on the ladder for a career in the civil service, the priesthood, or the army. Many of the statues of important officials from different periods show them as scribes, seated cross-legged with a papyrus roll across their knees<sup>18</sup>.

The scribe's basic equipment consisted of a pen case, red and black ink, and a set of reed pens. The ink was made from powdered red ochre and soot. Texts were normally written in black; red ink was sometimes used for the opening and closing words at the beginning and end, for punctuation, and occasionally for corrections<sup>19</sup>.

Apart from the inscriptions carved on stone artefacts and the walls of tombs and temples, everyday documents were written on papyrus, ostraca (potsherds, or flakes of limestone), wood and linen. Papyrus was expensive, as it was a royal monopoly<sup>20</sup>, so many documents concerned with social and business transactions were written on ostraca<sup>21</sup>. Artists also used them for trial pieces, or sketches of designs they planned to carve or paint in the decoration of a tomb or temple, and school pupils used ostraca for copying texts, doing mathematical calculations, and other lessons. Wooden writing boards, often covered with a thin layer of gypsum plaster, were also used by school children, and a number of ancient Egyptian folk tales have survived on writing-boards which were discarded by their ancient owners<sup>22</sup>.

Lessons taught included dictation and copying, the hieratic script apparently being the first version of the script which pupils were taught. In fact, it is possible that only pupils in temple and artists' schools learned the more elaborate hieroglyphic script<sup>23</sup>. A large number of texts copied by school pupils for practice have survived, such as the letters to Vizier Khay, dating to around 1200 BC, and now in the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto<sup>24</sup>, and Papyrus Lansing and Papyrus Anastasi, now in the British Museum, London<sup>25</sup>. Mathematics and geometry were also important subjects, particularly for accounting and architecture. One of the most valuable Egyptian papyri in the British Museum is the Rhind Mathematical Papyrus, dating from approximately 1540 BC, which contains various mathematical problems and calculations, including how to calculate the volume of a truncated pyramid<sup>26</sup>. History and religion were taught, as well as geography and foreign languages for those pupils hoping to enter the civil or diplomatic

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18 'Education' in Redford ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, Vol. 1, p. 438 ff.; J. J. and R. M. Janssen, *Growing Up in Ancient Egypt* (London, 1990).

19 Quirke and Spencer, *British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt*, p. 123.

20 J. Černý, *Paper and Books in Ancient Egypt* (London, 1947).

21 Quirke and Spencer, *British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt*, p. 123; Redford ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, Vol. 3, p. 188.

22 Quirke and Spencer, *British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt*, p. 123 and Fig. 106.

23 Redford ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, Vol. 1, p. 439, and Vol. 3, p. 208.

24 A. H. Gardiner, *Theban Ostraca*, Part 1 (Toronto, 1913).

25 A. H. Gardiner, *Late Egyptian Miscellanies* (Brussels, 1937); R. A. Caminos, *Late Egyptian Miscellanies* (London, 1954); M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 2 (Berkeley, 1976).

26 G. Robins and C. Shute, *The Rhind Mathematical Papyrus* (London, 1987).

service<sup>27</sup>.

Certain texts were clearly used as schoolbooks or teaching aids. Kemit, meaning something like 'summary,' was compiled in the early Middle Kingdom, and contained a series of formal greetings used in letter writing, a story as an example of the narrative style, and phrases commonly used in ideal biographies<sup>28</sup>. Onomastica, or word lists, were also used for educational purposes, and several examples of these have survived from the late Middle Kingdom onwards. The lists covered a wide range of subjects including plant names, birds, animals, various types of food and beverages, parts of the human body, buildings, agricultural land, a soldier's equipment, towns in Egypt, the topography of Syria and Palestine, foreign proper names and names of Egyptian kings<sup>29</sup>.

The evidence for actual schools is inconclusive. Royal princes were taught by a tutor, or a series of instructors, presumably along with siblings, and also with other boys known as the 'royal companions'<sup>30</sup>. It seems that wealthy noblemen also had tutors for their children, and texts indicate that sons of relatives, acquaintances, and even employees, who showed promise, would be given the chance of obtaining an education along with the noblemen's sons<sup>31</sup>.

There were probably schools in the temples for training boys in the priesthood, in the army, and on the evidence found in the village of Deir el-Medina, also in workmen's villages, so that the artists, painters and sculptors could understand the inscriptions they were carving or painting<sup>32</sup>.

Punishment was clearly meted out by a frustrated teacher from time to time, as there are many examples of schoolboy exercises copied out by pupils, where the theme is the application of corporal punishment for laziness in learning lessons. These exercises were, therefore, intended to encourage the pupil to learn his lessons, and apply himself keenly, or he would be punished like the pupil in the text<sup>33</sup>.

*"Do not be lazy, and do not think of pleasure, or you will be a failure. Write with your hand, read with your mouth, and take advice from those who know more than you... A boy's ear is on his back, and he listens to the beating of it"<sup>34</sup>.*

*"My heart is sick from speaking advice. Even if I give you a hundred blows, you disregard them all. But I will make a man of you yet, you bad boy"<sup>35</sup>.*

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27 Redford ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, Vol. 1, p. 440.

28 Redford ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, Vol. 2, pp. 226-227.

29 Redford ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, Vol. 2, p. 605.

30 Janssen, *Growing Up in Ancient Egypt*, p. 70 and p. 125 ff.

31 Janssen, *Growing Up in Ancient Egypt*, p. 67 ff.

32 Redford ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, Vol. 1, pp. 441-442; Janssen, *Growing Up in Ancient Egypt*, p. 68 ff; A. G. McDowell, *Village Life in Ancient Egypt*, pp. 127-164.

33 Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 2, p. 167 ff.

34 Papyrus Anastasi III, 3, 9 ff.; A. Erman, *The Ancient Egyptians: A Sourcebook of their Writings* (London, 1978), p. 189; W. K. Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt* (Yale University, 1972), p. 344.

35 Papyrus Sallier I, 7, 9 ff.; Erman, *The Ancient Egyptians*, p. 190.

## Seminar on Egyptology and Monuments

To what extent women were educated or literate is unknown. It is possible that royal princesses may have learned to read and write along with their brothers, but equally possible that any documents or letters purportedly written by a queen or princess, may in fact have been written by a scribe, or palace official. There are a few instances where a woman appears to have received an education, but these are the exception rather than the rule<sup>36</sup>.

Although they may have been illiterate, women did learn many domestic skills, including weaving, which was also undertaken by ladies of the royal household. Other skills were hairdressing, music and dancing. There are several examples in ancient tombs of the wife of the tomb owner playing a harp to entertain her husband. Musical skills were used for commercial purposes by women of the lower classes. Troupes of both male and female dancers and musicians were employed on the staff of royal palaces and noblemen's villas<sup>37</sup>.

Although there is ample evidence for the importance attached by the ancient Egyptians to learning and education, further discoveries, and particularly the translation of texts and inscriptions hitherto unread, will no doubt reveal more details of this vital aspect of their lives.

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36 "Literacy" in Redford ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, Vol. 2, pp. 297-299; G. Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, pp. 111-114.

37 J. Tyldesley, *Daughters of Isis: Women of Ancient Egypt*, pp. 114-121; Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, pp. 92-110.