

Ancient Egypt – Reading a Papyrus

Aims

To help students learn from papyrus
To enable students to gather information from a pictorial source
To encourage students to have confidence in collecting information from a variety of sources

Description

- A sequence of 7 slides to explore an overall topic 'Reading a papyrus'
- Slides 2 and 3 introduce papyrus and the information it can hold
- Slide 4 uses one scene as an example of information that can be seen on papyrus
- Slide 5 asks students to spot specific images in a scene
- Slide 6 uses an image from the Book of the Dead to encourage observational skills

Teaching ideas

- The presentation can be used on a whiteboard with the whole class or could be followed by individual students or groups.
- This activity could form part of a larger project focusing on language, writing and materials in ancient Egypt. The project could include work on hieroglyphs, the significance of images on papyrus and an art activity working with papyrus to produce chosen scenes.
- Slide 4 and 6 show scenes from everyday life.
- Slide 6 can be used to emphasise ancient Egyptian beliefs relating to the afterlife.
- Explore the Egyptian life and the Writing chapters of the British Museum's Ancient Egypt website: www.ancientegypt.co.uk which provides information on every day life and hieroglyphs.

Notes on the pictures

Slides 1 to 3: First page of the Book of the Dead of Panedjem II from Thebes, about 990 BC to 969 BC. Panedjem was one of the high priests of Amun. He is shown making an offering to Osiris. Osiris is holding the royal crook and flail and a staff incorporating the hieroglyphs for 'life', 'dominion' and 'stability'.

Slide 4. A page from the Book of the Dead of Nakht dating from around 1350-1300 BC. It shows Nakht and his wife, Tjuiu, worshipping Osiris and Maat (representing the established order of things). Nakht was a royal scribe and overseer of the army. This scene also includes a single-storey house and a garden. This picture is often taken as visual evidence for how ancient Egyptians lived, but an Egyptian representation is rarely what it seems; pictorial elements nearly always have hidden meanings, particularly in a papyrus intended for guidance in the Afterlife. The house is probably there as an

expression of the deceased's wish to return to earth. The pool is also symbolic of rebirth and resurrection.

Slide 5. A scene from the Book of the Dead of Hunefer, dating from around 1300 BC. The full papyrus page has hieroglyphs to the right and top of the picture. The centrepiece of the upper scene is the mummy of Hunefer, shown supported by the god Anubis (or a priest wearing a jackal mask). Hunefer's wife and daughter mourn, and three priests perform rituals. The two priests with white sashes are carrying out the Opening of the Mouth ritual. The white building at the right is a representation of the tomb, complete with portal doorway and small pyramid. Both these features can be seen in real tombs of this date from Thebes. To the left of the tomb is a picture of the stela which would have stood to one side of the tomb entrance. Following the normal conventions of Egyptian art, it is shown much larger than normal size, in order that its content (the deceased worshipping Osiris, together with a standard offering formula) is absolutely legible.

At the right of the lower scene is a table bearing the various implements needed for the Opening of the Mouth ritual. At the left is shown a ritual, where the foreleg of a calf, cut off while the animal is alive, is offered. The animal was then sacrificed. The calf is shown together with its mother.

Slide 6. A scene from the Book of the Dead of Nakht dating from around 1350 BC to 1300 BC, from the same tomb as Slide 4. This is spell 110 which shows the Field of Offerings and the Field of Rushes. The deceased were expected to undertake agricultural work in the Field of Rushes. Nakht is shown with Thoth at top right, with the balance and feather of Maat (referring to the Judgement Scene). He then paddles his boat across the Lake of Offerings where two mummiform deities stand before a table of offerings. Nakht is also shown worshipping the Heron of Plenty. He is shown pulling flax, reaping, and ploughing below. The boat of Wennefer (a name for the god Osiris), shown with a head of a snake, is moored in a channel of the water at the bottom. Three deities of the ennead (group of nine gods) are shown bottom right.

Background information

- Papyrus was made from the stems of a reed called cyperus papyrus. The stems were stripped and soaked. The soaked stems were beaten flat and then lain on top of each other in a criss-cross pattern. For longer texts, such as the Book of the Dead, sheets were attached together to form scrolls.
- Papyrus grew well in the Nile Delta and became the symbol of Lower Egypt. It was one of Egypt's major exports.
- Papyrus was also used in the manufacture of light boats, baskets and to make cartonnage (used for mummy masks and cases).
- The Book of the Dead was a collection of spells first used around 1600 BC. People chose the spells and chapters that they wished to be included for their tomb. The spells were recorded on scrolls of papyrus and versions for wealthier people have elaborate illustrations. Some of the spells were for recital during mummification or the funerary rituals. Other spells were used by the deceased during the journey to the afterlife to avoid falling into traps, to prepare for tests and to ensure the journey was completed safely.
- For further reading, we can recommend the following:

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- R.O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, (revised ed. C. A. R. Andrews) (London, The British Museum Press, 1989)
- A. McDonald, *Write Your Own Egyptian Hieroglyphs*, British Museum Press, 2007
- N. Spencer, *Egyptian Hieroglyphs*, British Museum Press, 2003
- Spencer, A. J. (ed.), *The British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt*, British Museum Press, 2007.