

# Ancient Egypt: Symbols of the pharaoh



Colossal bust of Ramesses II  
Thebes, Egypt  
1250 BC

Visit resource for teachers  
Key Stage 2

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## Background information

The ancient Egyptians used writing to communicate information about a person shown on a sculpture or relief. They called their writing 'divine word' because they believed that Thoth, god of wisdom, had taught them how to write. Our word hieroglyphs derives from a phrase meaning 'sacred carvings' used by the ancient Greek visitors to Egypt to describe the symbols that they saw on tomb and temple walls.

The number of hieroglyphic signs gradually grew to over 7000 in total, though not all of them were used on a regular basis. The hieroglyphs were chosen from a wide variety of observed images, for example, people, birds, trees, or buildings. Some represent the sounds of the ancient Egyptian language, but consonants only. No vowels were written out. Also, it was not an alphabetic system, since one sign could represent a combination of two or more consonants like the *gaming-board* hieroglyph which stands for the consonants *mn*. Egyptologists make the sounds pronounceable by putting an *e* between the consonants, so *mn* is read as *men*. Many other hieroglyphic signs were not pronounced at all but served to clarify meanings, such as a boat following the sound sign *dpt* which was the word for boat.

First developed in about 3250 BC, hieroglyphs were still used in the early centuries AD but gradually became less and less understood except by temple priests. By the time Egypt officially became a Christian country in the fourth century AD, hieroglyphs had fallen out of use. The Egyptian language continued to be spoken, but was now written in an alphabetic script called Coptic. When the Arabs conquered Egypt in the seventh century AD, they introduced the Arabic form of spoken and written language, which is still used by Egyptians today.

Alongside the hieroglyphic text, the ancient Egyptians made use of a variety of symbols to convey information. These symbols could be in the form of a 3D object or carved as a sign into the surface of a statue or relief.

## Table of Symbols

	<p><b>Ankh</b></p> <p>The ankh is a symbol of life. It was often carried in the hand.</p>
	<p><b>Nemes</b></p> <p>The nemes head dress is a piece of cloth pulled tight across the forehead and tied at the back, with two flaps hanging down the sides. It is worn by the pharaoh.</p>
	<p><b>Scarab</b></p> <p>Scarab beetles lay their eggs on a ball of dung, which is then rolled along the ground and dropped into a hole. The ancient Egyptians associated this with the sun moving across the sky each day. In addition, the beetle grubs hatching from the ball of dung were a sign of rebirth.</p>
	<p><b>Uraeus</b></p> <p>The uraeus is a rearing cobra with a flared hood. A symbol of protection, it guarded the gates of the underworld, warded off the enemies of the royal family and guided the dead pharaohs on their journey through the underworld. The uraeus was worn on the forehead.</p>
	<p><b>Cartouche</b></p> <p>A cartouche is an oval shape placed around the names of royal people in hieroglyphic inscriptions. It symbolized the pharaoh as a ruler of all that the sun encircled.</p>
	<p><b>Lotus flower</b></p> <p>Like the sun that rises in the morning and sets in the evening, the lotus flower blooms in the day and closes each night. The lotus was a symbol of rebirth, the renewal of life and the promise of everlasting life.</p>

## Resources

### British Museum websites

#### Teaching history with 100 objects

Free online resources to support teachers working in the new history curriculum through object-based learning. Access information, images, and video as well as teaching ideas for lessons at Key Stages 1-3.

[www.teachinghistory100.org](http://www.teachinghistory100.org)

### Books

#### For adults

M, Collier, Manley, B., and Parkinson, R., *How to Read Egyptian Hieroglyphs: a step-by-step guide to teach yourself*, British Museum Press 1998

Davies, W.V., *Reading the Past: Egyptian Hieroglyphs*, British Museum Press, 1987

#### For children

Marée, Marcel, *British Museum Pocket Dictionary of Pharaohs and Queens*, British Museum Press, 2005

Parkinson, Richard, *British Museum Pocket Guide to Hieroglyphs*, British Museum Press, 2003

## Gallery information

Room 4 is the Egyptian sculpture gallery. It contains examples of monumental sculpture from temples and tombs. The gallery contains a number of statues of pharaohs and ancient Egyptian deities (gods and goddesses) together with monumental pieces of stone architecture such as columns and carved wall reliefs. At the north end of the gallery are a range of massive stone sarcophagi (bases and lids).

The present arrangement of sculptures runs chronologically from the south to the north end of the gallery. The Rosetta Stone is situated, out of chronological order, at the centre of the gallery.

## What is it like to visit this gallery?

Room 4 is a main route to other parts of the British Museum. Students should be aware of this so that they can ensure that they do not block pathways themselves or with their possessions. Many of the objects are displayed on low plinths and most of them are not behind glass. The Egyptian sculpture Touch Tour for visually impaired visitors operates in this room although all other visitors are requested not to touch the objects. The gallery gets particularly busy in the centre around the Rosetta Stone where visitors cluster to observe the Stone or cross the gallery on their way to the Greek galleries. It is however, possible to find some quiet, empty spaces by the side walls of the galleries and a pre-visit will enable you to identify areas where you may gather the whole class or position groups to observe a particular object.

## Case Numbers

Please note that case numbers are usually small, white and high up on the glass.

## Preliminary activities

### General introductory activities

- Locate the area covered by ancient Egypt in an atlas and look at the modern countries which currently exist in this region of the world.
- Discuss the role of the pharaoh in ancient Egypt. Revise the names and dates of some famous pharaohs. Compare their role to that of other kings and queens which the students are familiar with from the past or the present. Look at the *Pharaoh* section of the ancient Egypt learning site ([www.ancientegypt.co.uk](http://www.ancientegypt.co.uk)) to find out about the role of these ancient rulers.

### Activities to support gallery activities

- Look for examples of modern symbols such as safety symbols, food label symbols, road sign symbols or religious symbols. Talk about what the symbols represent and where they are being used.
- Use the symbol sheet included in the background information section to familiarize the students with a range of ancient symbols and their meaning.
- Look for examples of statues in your local area. Discuss issues such as pose, material and relative size so that the students are familiar with these concepts before the visit.
- Look at the *Pharaoh* section of the ancient Egypt learning site ([www.ancientegypt.co.uk](http://www.ancientegypt.co.uk)) to find out about the role of these ancient rulers.

Ancient Egypt: Symbols of the pharaoh

**During your visit**

## Gallery activities: introduction for teachers

The gallery activities are a set of activity sheets which can be used by students working in Room 4. The sheets can be used as stand-alone activities or you may wish to develop work around particular sheets as suggested in the before and after sections of this resource.

- Where case numbers are indicated on a sheet, these are usually to be found marked in white numbers high up on the glass of that particular case.
- You are welcome to select the activities which are most appropriate for the focus of your visit and adapt sheets to meet the needs of your students.
- Each activity is designed to support the students in looking at, and thinking about, objects on display in the gallery.
- Individual activity sheets may be undertaken by single students, in pairs or as a small group.
- Where space is provided for recording this may be undertaken by the student or an adult helper as is most appropriate for the students involved.
- Familiarise the students and accompanying adults with the chosen activity sheets at school before the day of the visit. Make sure students and adults know what they are to do and are familiar with the vocabulary used on the sheets or which they may encounter in the gallery.

## **Gallery activities: briefings for adult helpers**

### **Gallery activity: Symbol detective**

- Symbols are a way of communicating meaning simply and quickly in a format which is easy to understand regardless of a person's writing or reading skills. Sometimes the symbols exist in a 3D form and sometimes they are carved into the surface of the sculpture. Remember to look behind sculptures wherever possible!
- This activity encourages students to identify a range of common ancient Egyptian symbols associated with the pharaoh and royal power in a variety of contexts.

### **Gallery activity: Sculpture study**

- Stone statues were a key part of many ancient Egyptian buildings - particularly temples. These statues may show a particular pharaoh, a god or goddess or a member of the ruling elite.
- This activity involves students in comparing a number of statues in terms of concepts such as posture and relative size so that they can start to recognize these features across other statues.

### **Gallery activity: Mighty Ramesses**

- The pharaoh was the most powerful person in ancient Egypt. The pharaoh used monumental sculpture as a way of conveying the pharaoh's power to their subjects.
- This activity encourages the students to recognize how a representation can convey information about the status and role of a person. You will need to look at all sides of the statue to complete the activity.

## Symbol detective

The Ancient Egyptians used symbols on their statues and carvings.

- Look carefully at the objects on display and see if you can spot any of these symbols carved on them.
- Each time you spot a symbol record it on this tally chart.

 <p>ankh</p>	 <p>nemes</p>	 <p>scarab</p>
 <p>cartouche</p>	 <p>uraeus</p>	 <p>lotus flower</p>

- Now decide which symbols were easiest to find, which one you found most often and whether you think you saw any other symbols.

# Sculpture study

These 3 sculptures are all in Room 4.

- Each time you find one, look at it carefully and then answer the questions by circling the right answer.

	What does the sculpture show? a human                      a god or goddess                      an animal
	How is it posed? standing                      sitting                      lying down
	What size is it? larger than life-size                      life size                      smaller than life-size
	Which symbols can you see on it? ankh    scarab                      nemes                      cartouche                      lotus                      papyrus

	What does the sculpture show? a human                      a god or goddess                      an animal
	How is it posed? standing                      sitting                      lying down
	What size is it? larger than life-size                      life size                      smaller than life-size
	Which symbols can you see on it? ankh    scarab                      nemes                      cartouche                      lotus                      papyrus

	What does the sculpture show? a human                      a god or goddess                      an animal
	How is it posed? standing                      sitting                      lying down
	What size is it? larger than life-size                      life size                      smaller than life-size
	Which symbols can you see on it? ankh    scarab                      nemes                      cartouche                      lotus                      papyrus

- Now describe a statue you would like to order to be carved – what will it show, how will it be posed, what size will it be and what symbols would you put on it?

## Mighty Ramesseses

The statue below is Ramesses II. He ruled for 67 years from 1279 BC. It is one of the largest pieces of Egyptian sculpture in the Museum and weighs over 7 tons.

- Find the statue in the gallery and then match each of these royal symbols by drawing an arrow from the word to its position on the picture below.

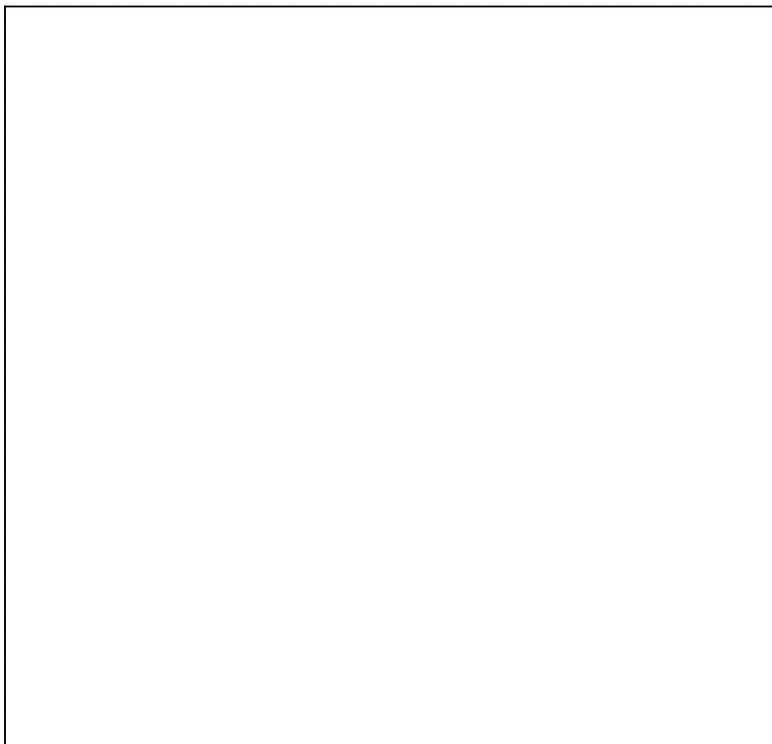


nemes

beard

remains of a uraeus

cartouche (look behind the statue)



Only the top part of the statue is on display so we don't know what the whole statue looked like.

Decide what you think the original pose of the whole sculpture was and draw it in this box.

Would it have been seated or standing? In what pose?

- Imagine you are one of Ramesses' subjects. How would you have felt looking at this statue? (proud? humble? scared? protected?)

**After your visit**

## **Follow-up activities: introduction**

These activities encourage students to reflect on the work undertaken during their Museum visit.

- Some of the activities draw directly on the information gathered at the Museum while others encourage the students to draw on personal experience or undertake additional research in the classroom.
- Each activity includes a suggestion for classroom work and also an outcome which maybe in the form of a written piece, drama presentation or artwork.

## **Follow-up activity: Symbol detective**

Curriculum links: history, art and design

- Revise the role of symbols in communicating information. Make a collection of modern symbols from everyday life. You could focus on one theme such as road sign symbols, food symbols or religious symbols. Are there examples of symbols in use around the school environment?
- As well as the shape of the symbol, particular colours are often associated with particular symbols. What message does the colour convey?
- Ask the students to create their own symbols for a particular context and test them on other people to see how effective the symbol is at conveying information.

## **Follow-up activity: Sculpture study**

Curriculum links: history, art and design

- Look for examples of 3D statues in the local environment. Who do they show and how can the statue be analysed in terms of material, relative size, posture and types of carving used?
- Collect information on each statue using a digital camera and written notes.
- Back in school create a chart comparing the different examples found.

## **Follow-up activity: Mighty Ramesses**

Curriculum links: history, art and design, citizenship

- Look at an official image of a modern ruler and discuss whether and how they convey a sense of their power. Compare expressions of power that the students may have already encountered, e.g. portraits of Elizabeth I or Henry VIII.
- Collect examples of images of famous people from newspapers, magazines, etc.
- Ask the students to create an image of themselves which conveys the message of great personal importance and power. They could pose in person for others to review, draw themselves in their chosen pose or work with a partner and a digital camera to create an image which could be printed and displayed alongside those of other powerful classmates!
- Encourage the students to think about viewpoint, either in terms of where the image is displayed in relation to the viewer (i.e. the less important people) or in terms of the angle of the image (i.e. taking a photograph from lower down, looking upwards rather than at the same eye level as the powerful person).