Hieroglyphs unlocking ancient Egypt
13 October – 19 February 2022

Guide for teachers

Using this resource
This resource is designed to support your visit to the BP exhibition Hieroglyphs: unlocking ancient Egypt. It aims to be cross-curricular and offer opportunities to work exhibition objects and information into different curriculum subjects.

This resource is accompanied by a downloadable image bank of objects displayed in the exhibition.

The images can be used to introduce students to some of the objects they will see in the exhibition. The images are grouped under curricular areas which link to the follow-up activity suggestions in this guide. They can also be used as starting points for teacher-designed activities which support the themes of the exhibition and particular topics and skills being studied in the classroom.

Curriculum links
The exhibition can be used to support the following curriculum areas:

History/The world around us/Social studies:
Ancient Egypt, ancient writing, the Rosetta Stone, historical evidence, understanding the past.

Art and design/The arts/Expressive arts:
Human artistic expression, writing surfaces, diversity of written scripts, writing in the built environment.

PSHE/ PD&MU/Health and wellbeing:
Communication, sense of community, connections to the past, making sense of your world.

Introduction to the exhibition
Ancient Egyptian writing, which includes hieroglyphs and other scripts, is rich and diverse and allows us to understand the way ancient Egyptians lived and experienced the world. The pioneering work of Jean-François Champollion and his peers enabled them, and the scholars who followed them, to make important discoveries. The Rosetta Stone provided the key which allowed hieroglyphs to be deciphered, transforming our understanding of ancient Egypt and the origins of many civilisations.

Making the most of the exhibition
In advance
Decide on a focus for the visit and follow-up activities. Go through this with the students.
Use the image bank to familiarise students with some of the exhibition content. Go through any exhibition activities with the students and accompanying adults beforehand.

On the day
Encourage adults to allow students to linger at objects which interest them and to discuss what they see and share ideas as they go round. Remind students to behave calmly and politely. Photography is allowed in the exhibition and students may also take photographs of relevant objects in the Museum’s permanent galleries.

Afterwards
Use the information (written, drawn, photographed and/or discussed) gathered by the students in the exhibition and the Museum galleries as a starting point for follow-up activities back at school.
The ‘big’ questions
It is a good idea to have a big question for students to keep in mind during their visit to the exhibition. Here are some possible questions:

- Which did I think, and why, was the most interesting object in the exhibition?
- What did I learn about ancient Egyptian writing that I did not know before?
- What sources of evidence does the exhibition include and how useful did I find them for learning about writing in ancient Egypt?
- What else would I put in the exhibition to make it engaging/informative?

Exhibition themes
The exhibition is divided into themed sections.

Introduction
The Rosetta Stone provided the key that enabled scholars to decipher hieroglyphs, allowing subsequent generations to unlock over 4000 years of ancient Egyptian history and to enhance our understanding of the origins of ancient civilisations.

A forgotten language
Hieroglyphs are the oldest form of Egyptian writing and represent a complex spoken language. Ancient Egyptian writing evolved over time with the development of the hieratic and demotic (cursive handwritten scripts) and the Coptic script (and spoken language) which used Greek letters.

With the spread of Christianity, ancient religious practices were abandoned and, in AD 356, temples were ordered to be closed. As hieroglyphs and other ancient Egyptian written scripts fell out of use, displaced by ancient Greek and later Arabic, the ability to read ancient Egyptian writing vanished.

Inspired guesswork
The decipherment of hieroglyphs was a long and fascinating journey driven by a thirst for knowledge of ancient Egypt in medieval and modern times. However, too much trust in inaccurate classical and biblical sources, as well as the complexity of the language itself, set back early efforts.

Despite some accurate deductions, Egypt’s ancient writings remained largely a mystery until 1799, when the rediscovery of the Rosetta Stone (inscribed with three different scripts) provided a vital key.

The race to decipherment
The quest to unravel ancient Egyptian civilisation intensified with the contributions of two scholars – England’s Thomas Young (1773–1829) and France’s Jean-François Champollion (1790–1832). Their work overlapped in significant ways as they began to realise that some of the familiar hieroglyphic images represented spoken language. But they differed in method and persistence, with each scholar attracting supporters and critics.

Rediscovering ancient Egypt
By 1824 Champollion had exhausted the research materials available in Paris. For fresh resources, he travelled first to Italy’s museums and to Egypt four years later. Champollion continually refined his understanding of hieroglyphs until his death in 1832.

Over the next 200 years, scholars from across the world would continue his work. Thanks to these efforts, we now know how to read ancient Egyptian texts. Every translation gives us new insight into how ancient Egyptians once lived and experienced the world.

Writing for eternity
The decipherment of hieroglyphs in 1822 is now considered the most important event in the history of Egyptology, unlocking 4,000 years of history, language, literature, religion, art and architecture. Most importantly, it has allowed us to find the similarities – and differences – between ancient Egyptians and ourselves.
Curricular opportunities

History/The world around us/Social studies
Ancient Egyptian writing is rich and diverse and allows us to understand the ways in which ancient Egyptians lived and experienced the world.

Use the exhibition to find out about the different written scripts used in ancient Egypt and consider where and how they were used.

Spotlight objects:
See slides 1, 2, 3 and 4 in the Powerpoint image bank that accompanies this resource.

Follow up activities:
- Create a timeline for ancient Egypt. Add objects from the exhibition to the timeline and discuss the duration of the ancient Egyptian civilisation and the ways in which this history is divided up and labelled today.
- Find out about the development of writing in ancient Egypt. Look for objects which show how writing was used and the different roles writing took as a form of communication. Think about the different scripts used to communicate the spoken language(s) in ancient Egypt.
- Research other ancient written scripts. How were they used? Have they been deciphered successfully? What objects are they associated with? Compare your finding with what you have found out about ancient Egyptian writing.

Art and design/The arts/Expressive arts
Ancient Egyptian text existed on many different surfaces and on a range of everyday, ceremonial and monumental objects.

Use the exhibition to explore the visual presence of ancient Egyptian writing. Consider the different objects which carry writing and how this writing has been presented to the reader/viewer.

Spotlight objects:
See slides 5, 6, 7 and 8 in the Powerpoint image bank that accompanies this resource.

Follow up activities:
- Discuss the way in which writing in the exhibition has a visual presence. How has written information in different scripts been arranged on the writing surface? Look for examples of text today where the writing has been deliberately arranged and consider aspects of text design such as font size, colour, text orientation and how this helps the text communicate with the reader/viewer. Discuss how a viewer might gain meaning from its visual appearance.
- Create a piece of art using written text. You could take a single piece of text and explore different ways in which it could be displayed. Or take a single word such as sad, happy or wealthy and create an artwork using colour, orientation and symbols to make the meaning of the word clear for the viewer.
- Research other examples of ancient scripts on monuments and portable objects. Create a pin board/poster to share your research.
PSHE/ PD&MU/Health and wellbeing
Communication is a vital aspect of any human community. Ancient writing enabled the spoken language to be recorded in a visual format.

Use the exhibition to think about the role of written texts, how they enable communication within a society and how they relate to modern languages and communication styles.

Spotlight objects:
See slides 9, 10, 11 and 12 in the Powerpoint image bank that accompanies this resource.

Follow up activities:
• Review the different ways in which writing is used in the exhibition. Compare this with how writing is used today. Look for examples of written scripts in the classroom and around the school. How does this written text communicate information and ideas to the people who see it?

• Consider how people communicate using different languages. Collect examples of saying something in different languages, for example saying “Good morning” in 10 different ways. Draw on home languages used by school staff and students to create word banks in different languages and written scripts.

• Discuss how spoken and written language can act as an aspect of personal and group identity. Collect examples of how written text can both convey information and express identity, for example a school’s name on a piece of school uniform.