

Large print exhibition text



Hieroglyphs unlocking ancient Egypt

Please do not remove from the exhibition

This guide provides all the exhibition text in large print.

There are further resources available for blind and partially sighted people.

Audio described tours for blind and partially sighted visitors, led by the exhibition curator and a trained audio describer, will explore highlight objects from the exhibition. Tours are accompanied by a handling session. Please check the events website page for dates and times:

britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/hieroglyphs-unlocking-ancient-egypt#events

Booking is essential. Please book online or email tickets@britishmuseum.org

The tour is also available as a self-led option. You can find the audio on the Museum's SoundCloud, along with other content on ancient Egypt:

soundcloud.com/britishmuseum

There is also an object handling desk at the exhibition entrance that is open daily from 11.00 to 16.00.

For any queries about access at the Museum please email access@britishmuseum.org

Sponsor's statement

We'd like to congratulate the British Museum on curating this unique and fascinating exhibition.

Hieroglyphs: unlocking ancient Egypt gives us the opportunity to unravel one of the world's best known ancient civilisations. The story of how a forgotten language and the everyday lives of ancient Egyptians were deciphered is remarkable, revealed thanks to the ingenuity and persistence of the Rosetta Stone code breakers.

As a visitor, aided by the spectacular items on display, you can delve into the lives of an ancient society no longer with us, but one which has left its imprint on the world forever. We hope that you thoroughly enjoy it.

Supported by bp

Advisory statement

Human remains

This exhibition contains human remains on closed display. Please ask a member of staff if you require further information.

The British Museum is committed to curating human remains with care, respect and dignity. Find out more on our website about our principles governing the holding, display and study of human remains.

[britishmuseum.org/our-work/departments/
human-remains](https://britishmuseum.org/our-work/departments/human-remains)

[Exhibition introduction, to right of entrance]

A forgotten language

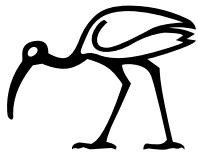
The once lost language of ancient Egypt has long invited speculation and inspired legend. A formidable superpower since its unification around 3100 BC, Egypt experienced a cultural transformation as it was increasingly ruled by foreign powers throughout the first millennium BC.

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

[Opposite exhibition introduction]

A quest for all ages

This hieroglyph means 'to find' and is pronounced *gem*:



Follow the *gem*-bird and discover an ancient Egyptian saying!

There are three *gem*-birds to find.

[Labels for object in wall case, left to right]

Sacred carvings

This inscription from the temple of King Amenemhat III is written in hieroglyphs, the oldest ancient Egyptian form of writing. Commonly used in temples, tombs and other monuments, hieroglyphs depict objects from the real world such as animals or plants. But their picture-like nature hid the fact that they represent a complex spoken language, delaying decipherment for centuries.

1855–1808 BC, Hawara, limestone
British Museum, EA1072

In praise of the king



These mirrored hieroglyphs arranged in columns read: 'Amenemhat – King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Lord of the Two Lands, who creates [...]. Horus who is in Shedet [and] Sobek, he of

A forgotten language

Shedet, give life and stability.' The city of Shedet (present-day Fayum) was also known as Crocodilopolis by the Greeks.

Duration: 25 seconds

[Display case, labels left to right]

Ancient handwriting

Writing with a brush or a reed pen and ink, as opposed to carving in hard stone, led to the development of a less pictorial, more abbreviated script called 'hieratic'. Over time, the script became increasingly cursive, developing into 'demotic'. Handwritten scripts were used for daily correspondence and literature. They mostly read from right to left, in contrast to hieroglyphic texts which could go in either direction.

1525–1336 BC, Egypt, bronze (far left)

British Museum, EA41643

1295–1186 BC, Thebes, limestone (centre left)

British Museum, EA41542

100–88 BC, Gebelein, ceramic (centre right)

British Museum, EA29703

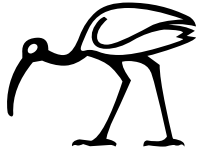
Towards Coptic

After Alexander the Great conquered Egypt in 332 BC, the use of Greek became widespread. Egyptian words were annotated with Greek letters to help with their pronunciation. Later, demotic signs were also included to express sounds in the Egyptian language that did not exist in Greek. By AD 100, an effective system for writing Egyptian alphabetically was in place called 'Coptic'. The term comes from the Greek word for 'Egyptian', *Αἰγύπτιος* (pronounced *ai-ku-pi-ti-os*). Coptic lives on as the liturgical language of Egyptian Christianity.

AD 600–700, Egypt, papyrus (far right)

British Museum, EA71005,6

[In corner of room]



Hieroglyphs look like everyday objects, living things and natural features found in ancient Egypt. But signs don't always mean what they show. For example, these two signs are the letter 'n':



Spin the blocks and guess what real things the signs are based on.

Lift flap for answer

 is based on two arms

 is based on water waves

Together, they form a word:



 'no one' or 'not' (pronounced *nen*)

[Section introduction through entrance to next room]

Inspired guesswork

The path to the decipherment of hieroglyphs was long and fascinating, driven by an unwavering thirst for knowledge of ancient Egypt. But too much trust in erroneous classical and biblical sources, as well as the complexity of the language itself, set back progress for centuries. Early scholars gave the picture-like signs magical meanings. Despite some accurate deductions, Egypt's ancient writings remained largely a mystery until 1799, when the rediscovery of the Rosetta Stone provided a vital key.

[Label for object in front of section introduction]

The enchanted basin

Historians during the Mamluk Sultanate (1250–1517) heard of a basin of ‘dark stone ... inscribed with the writing of birds’ that floated magically across the Nile in the AD 900s. This sarcophagus, made to hold the remains of the nobleman Hapmen, is the source of the legend.

Known as the fountain of lovers, some believed its water could offer relief from ‘the torments of love’. It was discovered near the Mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo, in an area still known as al-Hawd al-Marsud – ‘the enchanted basin’.

About 600 BC, Cairo, black granite
British Museum, EA23

[Subsection introduction for centre plinth]

Arab endeavours

Colourful hieroglyphs captured the attention of medieval Arab travellers as they explored ancient temples and tombs, particularly from the AD 900s onwards. Describing the mysterious writing as the 'letters of birds', most probably due to the frequent appearance of bird signs, Arab scholars hoped to uncover the secrets of ancient sciences and magic. Some used hieroglyphs as cryptic codes for the Arabic alphabet, while others consulted local Coptic speakers, searching for a way to understand the ancient texts.

Inspired guesswork

**[Display case, object labels left to right,
back to front]**

Hermes ‘the greatest and greatest great god’

Hermes Trismegistus was the Greek version of the Egyptian god of knowledge and writing, Thoth. Often depicted writing, he was believed to be the founder of sciences including medicine, astronomy and alchemy, and the inventor of hieroglyphs. Medieval Arabic sources drew parallels between the legend of Hermes and the Prophet Idris (Enoch), both believed to be ‘the first to write’. The manuscript with fake hieroglyphs reads: ‘The temple script, language of Enoch – peace be upon him’.

776, paper

The British Library, Add MS 23420/1

300–200 BC, Egypt, ceramic mould with modern plaster cast
(London, 1912)

British Museum, EA51804

Hieroglyphic characters explained

Ibn Wahshiyah (died AD 930) was an Iraqi scholar who documented differences between ancient Egyptian scripts. His idea that a known language – Coptic – could unlock an unknown one became the principle on which later decipherment was based. Original manuscripts are rare but translations show that his work enjoyed widespread popularity.

1806, London, paper (back)
The British Library, 66.b.24

Magical meanings

This medieval Arabic manual on lucky charms explores the supernatural and medical properties of jewels, stones, plants and animals. Here, the text discusses star-related imagery to be inscribed on stones and other materials for the making of charms that represent specific planets.

Inspired guesswork

Probably 1300–1350, paper (front)

The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Arab.
d. 221, fol. 48b and 49a

[Label for object on wall]

Coptic keepers of knowledge

Arab scholars saw ancient Egyptians as masters of alchemy – the study of mystical chemistry and philosophy. Coptic monks were believed to be the keepers of ancient wisdom as they still spoke the old language of Egypt. Only four Coptic alchemical texts survive, including this one, which was probably translated from Arabic. The sun symbol means ‘gold’.

AD 1000–1100, Egypt, papyrus

The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, Ms. Copt. a.2

[Quote to right of object label]

It is quite clear that the study by medieval Egyptians and Arabs of ancient Egypt, its

language, religion, monuments and general history, flourished long before the earliest European Renaissance contact.

Dr Okasha El Daly
Egyptologist and Head of Acquisitions, Qatar University
Press

[Subsection introduction on wall opposite]

Interest from Europe

From the 1400s, Rome became the bustling centre for Egyptian studies. Ancient monuments that had fallen into ruin, brought to Italy as trophies of Roman conquest long ago, were rediscovered and restored. Scholars of the Renaissance period (1300–1550) began to study the inscriptions and old manuscripts that slowly reached them in Europe from travellers to Egypt. They believed that hieroglyphs represented concepts as symbols, rather than a written language.

[Display case, labels right to left]

The watchful hare

The reading of hieroglyphs as symbols was encouraged by the rediscovery of *Hieroglyphica* in 1419, a text attributed to 5th-century Alexandrian priest Horapollo the Younger. This oldest surviving copy provides descriptions in Greek of 189 hieroglyphic signs.

Horapollo wrongly assumed hieroglyphs to be symbolic image-signs with no phonetic (sound) element, but occasionally he arrived at the right answer. The hare, he explained, meant 'open' in ancient Egyptian because 'this animal always keeps its eyes open'. In this instance, his translation was correct despite his faulty reasoning.

1301–1400, Andros, paper manuscript
Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence MS 69.27

664–525 BC, Egypt, glazed composition amulet

Inspired guesswork

British Museum, EA20853

Reinventing hieroglyphs

Renaissance scholars searching for a universal language believed that Egyptian hieroglyphs expressed ideas more literally than their own alphabets. Italian architect and artist Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) became the father of a movement that ‘reinvented’ hieroglyphs by mixing characters to give them new meaning. The symbol on this medal, which combined an eye with a bird wing, became his personal icon.

1446–1450, Italy
British Museum, G3,IP.1

[Quote from object on wall]

If you put frankincense up in front of the lamp and look at the lamp, you see the god near the lamp. You sleep on a reed mat without having spoken to anyone on earth, and he tells you

*the answer in a dream. Here are the words
which you should write on the wick of the lamp:
BAKHUKHSIKHUKH – soul of darkness, son of
darkness.*

Quote from the London Magical Papyrus

[Label for object on wall]

The London Magical Papyrus

This demotic text has Old Coptic and Greek annotations, some of which could be read by European scholars. It contains spells for healing, winning love and neutralising poison. Some demotic signs were used in Coptic to represent sounds that did not exist in Greek. In Old Coptic, the shape and usage of the demotic signs had not yet been standardised.

AD 200–300, Thebes, papyrus (back wall)
British Museum, EA10070,2

[Display case on left, labels right to left]

Ancient Roman marvels

The ancient Egyptians constructed tall needle-like stone monuments known as obelisks, often dedicated to the sun god Ra. But the obelisk in Rome's Piazza Navona was carved by Roman craftspeople who demonstrated a clear familiarity with hieroglyphic writing. Renaissance scholars began to study them as 'authentic' texts that had survived from Egyptian antiquity.

1678, Amsterdam, paper
British Museum, M,33.6

Father of the owls

Influenced by medieval Arab intellectuals, German Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680) identified Coptic as the language hidden behind hieroglyphs. Most of his readings were fantasy, but his suggestion that the signs represented sounds

as well as ideas greatly influenced later western scholars.

Kircher's multi-volume work on Egyptology, the *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, won him the nickname 'father of the owls'. Owls appear frequently in the ancient Egyptian script and represent the letter 'm'.

1678, Italy, paper
The British Library, G.2083

332–30 BC, Egypt, limestone
British Museum, EA38276

[Plinth to left, label for object on wall]

The travelling obelisk

This fragment comes from an obelisk originally carved in Heliopolis in honour of King Psamtek II (595–589 BC). The obelisk was taken by Roman emperor Octavian in 30 BC to celebrate his conquest of Egypt and re-erected in Rome where

Inspired guesswork

it doubled as a sundial. In 1748 it was moved by Pope Pius VI to the Piazza di Montecitorio where it still remains today.

595–589 BC, Heliopolis, red granite
MiC – Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, Inv. 2326

[Display case label]

Capturing details

Impressed by the enormous scale of their hieroglyphs, Renaissance artists and scholars intensively studied Rome's obelisks. They began to record inscriptions more methodically by creating plaster reliefs, moulds and casts, which captured details accurately. The winged dung-beetle comes from the top of the obelisk at the Piazza di Montecitorio.

Before 1789, Rome, plaster casts
Thorvaldsens Museum, ThM L206, ThM L214

[Display cases on plinth to left, labels right to left]

Mummy souvenirs

Mummy bandages played an important role in the history of decipherment as they were easy to obtain in Europe and often carried writing. Wrappings were distributed amongst attendees of mummy unwrapping events, held from about 1600 to 1908. This piece inscribed with a Book of the Dead spell, taken from the body of a woman named Aberuait, was one such souvenir.

332–30 BC, Saqqara, linen
Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités égyptiennes, N 3059

[Picture caption] The French Egyptology Society unwrap the mummy of a priestess of Amun in Cairo, 31 March 1891.

© Public domain: Paul Philippoteaux / Wikimedia Commons

Inspired guesswork

Please touch 

Linen similar to mummy wrapping material

[Picture caption] The statuette on display can also be seen in this drawing from a 1677 catalogue for Ferdinando Cospi's museum.

© Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

[Label for objects at back]

Curious things

Progress in deciphering hieroglyphs depended on the material available for study in Europe. The royal fashion of assembling curiosity cabinets was adopted by wealthy merchants, priests and travellers from the 1600s. Anything that seemed unusual or 'exotic', including Egyptian antiquities, became a popular collector's item.

The cabinet of the nobleman Ferdinando Cospi

(1606–1686) was one of the oldest of these collections. Drawings show that it contained ‘Ptah-Sokar-Osiris’ statues – mummy-like statuettes showing the creator god Ptah merged with funerary gods Sokar and Osiris, seen here with two feathers on his head.

1677, Bologna, paper (back left)
British Museum, 1852,0612.471

1069–656 BC, Egypt, wood (back right)
MCABo EG 341, Museo Civico Archeologico, Bologna

[Label for objects in two display cases on left]

Early collecting

By the 1700s, the Museo Borgiano was one of the richest Egyptian collections in Europe with over 700 artefacts. It included the statue of the deified individual Pa-Maj, engraved with magical texts and sketches of various gods. Objects that boasted writing and drawing were popular subjects with artist-antiquarians.

Inspired guesswork

Private collections were often later integrated into national museums. The Museo Borgiano became part of the National Archaeological Museum of Naples.

350–300 BC, Egypt, basalt

MiC – Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, inv. n. 1065

Before 1850, Velletri, paper (right)

Thorvaldsens Museum, ThM E1416, E1418

[Touch object label on plinth to left and diagonal]

Please touch 

Replica of a Nectanebo I relief

[Label for object on wall]

A pseudo-hieroglyphic fake

Earnest study of the ancient scripts benefitted from accurate to scale reproductions of objects.

But for some private collectors hooked by the ‘spirit’ of ancient Egypt, intricate fakes like this were just as acceptable. Filled with nonsensical characters evocative of hieroglyphic writing, the piece was inspired by a genuine carving from the reign of King Nectanebo I (380–362 BC).

About 1711, Italy, marble

MCABo EG 3707, Museo Civico Archeologico, Bologna

[QR code label]

The Bembine Tablet of Isis

Scan the code to see the Bembine Tablet, a Roman art piece that confounded scholars for centuries with its amusingly garbled hieroglyphs.



britishmuseum.org/isis

Inspired guesswork

[Display case to right]

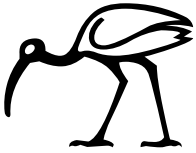
On the threshold of understanding

Early Italian collections were studied by Danish antiquarian and coin specialist Georg Zoëga (1755–1809). Zoëga became the leading Egyptologist of his generation and was almost successful in decipherment. He rejected the view that hieroglyphs concerned occult sciences and magical rites, reading many inscriptions instead as praise of kings and gods. His early copy of the hieroglyphs on this statue is the only evidence of its now lost inscription.

2022 print of original from 20 July 1789, Bologna, paper
© Det Kgl. Bibliotek – Royal Danish Library, NKS 357b folio, XIII, 1c (XIII, 3, 3, 6)

747– 30 BC, Egypt, wood
MCABo EG 335, Museo Civico Archeologico, Bologna

[To right, in corner of room]



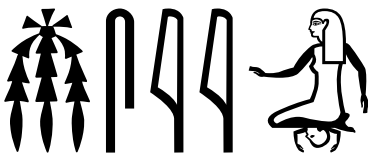
Some hieroglyphs are silent. They sit at the end of a word to give us a clue to its meaning.

This word means 'to be born' or 'to give birth'. It is pronounced *mesy*:



Which silent hieroglyph should go at the end?

Lift flap for answer



Can you see the baby?

[Plinth to right of trail, labels left to right]

Workshop of wonders

Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770–1844) was already a talented young sculptor when he moved from Copenhagen to Rome to complete his studies. There he met Zoëga, who instilled in him a great appreciation for antique arts, including ancient Egyptian artefacts. Thorvaldsen's collection of casts, pencil sketches and copper engravings of inscriptions became a must-see for anyone interested in ancient Egypt.

Before 1737, London, paper
Thorvaldsens Museum, ThM E1394

The power of words

This magical sculpture depicts the god Bes protecting Horus as a child. Notice the faded hieroglyphs on the back. Pouring water over the words unleashed their power.

Zoëga's comments on the underside of the accompanying drawing show that he exchanged technical information about the object with scholars in England: 'British Museum. Sycamore wood, covered with a bituminous substance like pitch, above which the hieroglyphs are painted in yellow.' The sculpture had been part of the British Museum's collection since 1785.

747–332 BC, Egypt, wood
British Museum, EA60958

About 1792, London, pencil, pen and ink on paper
Thorvaldsens Museum, ThM D1167

[Subsection introduction on plinth to right]

The French Expedition

Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Egypt on 1 July 1798 with a force of 40,000 troops, determined to cut off Britain's lucrative trade with India by seizing control of overland routes leading to the Red Sea. The expedition unusually included a large team of scholars and scientists who surveyed and mapped the country. To safeguard her own economic interests, Britain allied with the Ottoman governors of Egypt who had ruled there since 1517.

[Display case on left]

Mapping Egypt

During the Expedition, the French scholars made numerous drawings, descriptions and maps of Egypt. These were later compiled into the influential multi-volume publication *Description de l'Égypte*. Their work became invaluable for any scholar researching ancient Egypt. The map here shows the island of Elephantine and the town of Aswan at Egypt's southern border.

1821–1830, Paris, paper
British Museum, RBC.2°1

They have a great interest in the sciences and make great efforts to learn the Arabic language and the colloquial. In this they strive day and night.

Historian Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti (1753–1825) describes the French scholars in Cairo during the invasion of 1798.

Inspired guesswork

[Labels for objects on back wall, left to right]

Challenging the Church

North of Luxor, the Expedition discovered the Dendera zodiac, an astrological calendar which was later used to question the historical reliability of the Bible. The Catholic Church was incensed by arguments that used pagan carvings to contradict its Scriptures. This smaller copy was based on drawings of the original, which is now in Paris.

1819, Paris, marble (back left)
The Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, E.1.1862

Ruins at Apollonopolis Parva

Artist-antiquarian Dominique Vivant Denon (1747–1825) was one of the most eminent members of the Expedition and later the first director of the Louvre. On his return to Paris,

Denon published his travel journal and drawings of the great temple-complexes of Upper Egypt to wide acclaim.

1799–1802, Egypt or France, paper (back right)
British Museum, 1836,0109.127

[Display case on right, labels left to right]

The Capitulation of Alexandria

Besieged by Ottoman, Egyptian and British forces in Alexandria, the French proposed terms of surrender on 30 August 1801. The final agreement would include Article 16, which stated all collections were 'subject to the disposal of the generals of the combined army'. Signed by all parties, it led to British possession of 22 Egyptian antiquities – including the Rosetta Stone. But the French scholars drew a line at giving up their research papers.

1801, Alexandria, paper (left)
On loan from The National Archives, UK, WO 1/345

Inspired guesswork

We ourselves will burn our treasures... Count on the memory of history: you too will have burnt a library in Alexandria!

French scientist Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire's fiery response to British demands for the Expedition's collections, 1801.

Not to be trusted

General John Hely-Hutchinson instructed Edward Daniel Clarke, a British scholar visiting Alexandria, to safeguard the Rosetta Stone and to copy the inscriptions in case it should be damaged: 'I do not regard much the threats of the French *savants*, it is better however not to trust them.'

1801, Alexandria, paper (centre)
British Museum, EA76744

HMS *Egyptienne*

As the British retrieved the Rosetta Stone from General Jacques-François de Menou's personal belongings, he protested it was as much his as

‘the linen of his wardrobe or his embroidered saddles’. This list details the objects that travelled to England with the Stone, some of which were recovered from French officers who had gathered antiquities while in Egypt. The artefacts arrived at Portsmouth Harbour in February 1802.

1801, Alexandria, paper (right)
British Museum, AESAr.312

[Label for film on right]

Voices of Rashid


The vibrant city of Rashid is more than just where the Rosetta Stone was found. This film takes you on a brief tour to celebrate the city’s rich history through the eyes of its residents.

Duration: 2 minutes 30 seconds

This film has audio.

Inspired guesswork

Directed by Mostafa Naguib.

Look out for the mouth hieroglyph  in the exhibition as children from Rashid share their thoughts on featured objects.

[Display case behind, opposite film]

The Rosetta Stone

In July 1799, preparing for battle with the Ottoman naval forces, the French rebuilt an old fort at the port city of Rashid. From the rubble of its foundations, soldiers discovered a broken stone upon which were carved three distinct scripts: hieroglyphic, demotic and Greek. The stone's significance was immediately recognised – could this finally be the key to decipherment?

Rashid was known as 'Rosette' to the Europeans, meaning 'little rose'. The city thus lent its name to the famous stone.

The Rosetta Stone is inscribed with a priestly decree repeated in each of the different scripts. The decree was drawn up on 27 March 196 BC by a council of Egyptian priests in Memphis during the reign of Ptolemy V Epiphanes. The text praises the righteous acts of the king and lists the honours bestowed upon him by the priesthood. This type of decree was not an Egyptian tradition but was adopted from Greek culture.

196 BC, Rashid, granodiorite
British Museum, EA24

[Label on back wall for projected film]

Journey of the Rosetta Stone

From a temple in the Nile Delta to the British Museum, follow the journey of the Rosetta Stone spanning over 2,200 years.

Duration: 2 minutes 45 seconds

Inspired guesswork

This film is silent.

Images © Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum;
Think Africa; Andrew Clayton-Payne; Look and Learn History
Picture Archive

**[Display case on left, next to first film, labels
left to right]**

Rosetta Stone family tree

During the Ptolemaic period (332–30 BC) when Egypt was governed by Greek-speaking Macedonian rulers, Egyptian priests copied the Greek fashion of honouring worthy leaders by erecting decrees. They added demotic and hieroglyphic translations, relevant to an Egyptian audience.

For each new king, the decree text was updated with royal names, dates and other important details. It was probably written on papyrus, then sent across Egypt to be carved onto stone locally.

Decree stelae are still being discovered and are named after their place of issue. This is why the Rosetta Stone is also known as the Memphis Decree.

Spreading the message

The last line of the Rosetta Stone orders its decree to be ‘inscribed on a stela of hard stone in sacred, native and Greek characters and set up in all temples of Egypt’. Three other copies of the Memphis Decree have since been found. These fragments, each in a different script, are from one ‘stela’ – an inscribed stone or wooden slab.

196 BC, Elephantine, sandstone
Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités égyptiennes, E 12677, AF 10006, AF 10007

A distant relative

This decree was issued in 238 BC in Canopus and partially survived on a stela that was reused

Inspired guesswork

in the threshold of a mosque next to the French Institute in Cairo. It was rediscovered in 1800 and acquired by the Louvre in 1837. Five other copies of this branch of the family were identified later.

238 BC, Cairo, basalt

Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités égyptiennes, N 273

[Section introduction through entrance to next room, to left]

The race to decipherment

The centuries-long quest to unravel ancient Egyptian civilisation intensified with the contributions of two scholars, Thomas Young (1773–1829) and Jean-François Champollion (1790–1832). Their work overlapped in significant ways as they came to realise that at least some of the familiar images represented spoken words. But they differed in method and persistence, each attracting supporters and critics as their goal drew near.

[Display case in front of section introduction]

Sharing Rosetta

To aid decipherment of the Rosetta Stone, prints and casts were swiftly distributed across Europe by the Society of Antiquaries, where the Stone had been kept for a few months before coming to the British Museum. Within one year of its arrival in England, institutions in every western European country had a copy. The shallow inscriptions proved difficult to reproduce by hand. The first attempts at copying used the Stone as a printing block instead.

1803, London, paper (left)
British Museum, RBC.2°.60

1802–1900, Britain, charcoal or graphite on paper (right)
British Museum AESAr.574, no. 46

[Inscription on tabletop to right]

Sept 1807

Champollion arrives in Paris to study Near Eastern languages

[Labels on table, left to right]

Obsessive genius

Jean-François Champollion (1790–1832) was a linguistic prodigy who mastered Coptic, ancient Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Syriac, Persian and Arabic. Encouraged by his older brother and fellow scholar Jacques Joseph (1778–1867), Champollion first examined the Rosetta Stone text when he was 17 years old. Like his peers, he focussed on the oval-shaped cartouches enclosing royal names.

1860–1900, France, ink on paper
Musée Champollion – Les Ecritures du Monde / Figeac

Champollion is one-of-a-kind. Despite critical health issues, he pursued his academic and scientific passion. Even the ruler of Egypt,

The race to decipherment

*Muhammad Ali, would come to admire
Champollion's enthusiasm and talent.*

Dr Hend Mohamed Abdel Rahman
Assistant Professor of Egypt's Modern and Contemporary
History, Minya University

Trial and error

Champollion could not make sense of the Rosetta Stone so he turned to this papyrus in 1808. He assumed that the cursive scripts on both objects were the same, thus heading for another failure: the papyrus is written in hieratic, not demotic as the middle text on the Stone. This funerary text is one of the 'Books of Breathing', a guide for the afterlife.

About 99 BC – AD 99, Thebes, papyrus
Huis van het boek, The Hague. MMW, 42/88

Comfort in Coptic

Discouraged, Champollion devoted himself to

the study of Coptic, long believed to be the last remnant of the ancient Egyptian language. His knowledge of Arabic enabled him to read Coptic grammar books and dictionaries compiled by medieval Arab scholars, such as this *Scala Magna* ('The Great Ladder') by Abu al-Barakat, which he found far superior to those written by European scholars.

1200–1300, Egypt, paper
The British Library, MS Or 1325 fol. 117a

I only dream of Coptic ... for fun I translate everything that comes to my mind into Coptic; I speak Coptic to myself (since no one would hear me), this is the real way to put pure Egyptian in my head.

Jean-François Champollion

The Askew Codex

Champollion studied Coptic dialects with Egyptian monks in Paris, soon becoming fluent.

The race to decipherment

They spoke Bohairic, the last and most widely used Coptic dialect. But he knew an older dialect, Sahidic, would be closer to ancient Egyptian. This Sahidic text is one of the few remaining complete copies of 'gnostic' writings – spiritual teachings of the resurrected Jesus.

About AD 200–400, probably Egypt, parchment
The British Library, MS 5114

[Picture caption] Coptic monks attend mass at the White Monastery in Sohag, Upper Egypt. The monastery was founded in AD 442.

© Matjaž Kačičnik

Geographical deductions

Champollion suspected that the ancient Egyptian language might have survived through the names of cities and villages. He studied Coptic lists of towns and the maps published in *Description de l'Égypte*. His efforts paid off when he discovered the sign that classified place names ☒, which can

be seen on this writing board.

1069–715 BC, Egypt, wood
British Museum, EA21635

Sounds of the scripts

Building on the previous work of Swedish scholar Johan David Åkerblad (1763–1819), Champollion attributed Coptic sounds to demotic. Through this, he was able to learn a vocabulary pivotal to understanding the older scripts. Yet Coptic also misled him just as it had those before him, not least because ancient Egyptian words were spelled in a different way.

1814–1822, Paris, paper
National Library of France, Department of Manuscripts,
NAF 20352

Coptic service



Singing in Coptic remains an integral part of the Coptic Church's liturgical services. This Theotokia

The race to decipherment

(a hymn to Mary) is sung by Muallim Wagdi Bishara and may resemble those Champollion would have listened to when he attended church services with members of the Coptic community in Paris.

Duration: 10 minutes 5 seconds
© Wagdi Bishara

[Tabletop inscription]

July 1814

Young begins studying the Rosetta Stone whilst in Worthing

[Table display, labels left to right]

‘The last man who knew everything’

British polymath Thomas Young made landmark contributions to the fields of medicine, physics, optics, linguistics and music before directing

his attention to Egyptology. In July 1814, the 41-year-old Young joined the ranks of researchers poring over the Rosetta Stone as ‘amusement of a few of my leisure hours’. His efforts to decipher the text would help Champollion later crack the hieroglyphic code, but his richest gift to Egyptology was his work on the demotic script.

About 1950, London, copper alloy medal
British Museum 1964,0405.3

1830, London, paper (far back)
British Museum, 1866,1013.655

Cursive writing

In 1823, Young published a drawing of Padihorpara’s Book of the Dead. He did not believe that the hieroglyphic script conveyed grammatical information or the sounds of Egyptian speech, but Champollion later used the same papyrus to illustrate the frequency of homophones: different signs that indicate the same sound.

332–30 BC, Egypt, papyrus (front)

The race to decipherment

British Museum, EA9907,4

Greek influence

Young assumed that phonetic sound-based writing was used only for Greek and Roman proper names, which reflected the influence of foreign elements in what he considered a purely ideas-based Egyptian script. Bilingual mummy-labels such as the one displayed here of Senpsais the Elder would have helped Young to compare demotic and Greek names.

AD 100–300, Akhmim, wood (back left)
British Museum, EA23215

Demotic obsession

Young argued that the demotic section of the Rosetta Stone was the key to understanding hieroglyphs, and compared it with the script found on papyri, mummy wrappings and labels. He was sceptical of the value of learning Coptic, doubting

whether even an early form of it would be similar enough to help with decipherment.

Egypt, 747–30 BC, linen (back right)
British Museum, EA73747

Please touch 

Papyrus

Word matching

Young's *Memorandums* show his first attempts to tackle the Rosetta Stone. He broke the Greek into sections and tried to match them with the other scripts. Young looked for characters that occurred repeatedly, pairing them with Greek words that appeared an equal number of times. But there were far more hieroglyphs, too many to represent an alphabet.

1814, London, paper
The British Library, ADD 27281, f92

The race to decipherment

[Table to right inscription]

Nov 1814

Champollion requests a cast of the Rosetta Stone

[Labels left to right]

First encounters

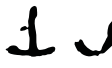
Champollion wrote to the Royal Society of London where Young was foreign secretary to verify his copies of the Rosetta Stone inscription. He had never seen the Rosetta Stone in person. Young drafted his reply in French at the end of Champollion's original letter.

1814, Grenoble and London, paper
The British Library, ADD 21026, f15-f16

I am convinced that I would have already fixed the reading of the entire inscription if I had had before my eyes a plaster cast in a mould made

on the original.

Jean-François Champollion

I have had great pleasure and interest, Sir, in making the comparisons you wish between the two copies of the inscription ... I see that we agree in the word  for MICI and in some other words, although there are cases where we differ greatly from each other.

Thomas Young

[Projected text on wall]

You advise me to study the inscription of Rosetta. That is exactly where I want to start.

Jean-François Champollion

My curiosity was excited by a note that the unknown language of the Stone of Rosetta ... was capable of being analysed into an alphabet of little more than thirty letters.

The race to decipherment

Thomas Young

My almost entire life is thus spent in the midst of the dead and stirring up the old dust of history, although the living ... received and greeted me with all desirable grace.

Jean-François Champollion

[It] is impossible that all the characters can be pictures of the things which they represent...

Thomas Young

What a distraction, indeed, for the heart and soul is a grammar that is more than six thousand years old!

Jean-François Champollion

[Table to left, labels right to left]

All the inscriptions on temples, and the generality of the manuscripts found with the mummies,

appear to relate to their ridiculous rites and ceremonies: I see nothing that looks like history.

British explorer William John Bankes to fellow antiquarian Hudson Gurney, 1816.

[Picture caption] The Philae obelisk in Kingston Lacy, Dorset.

© Marilyn Peddle / Flickr with crop

Important puzzle pieces

During this time, Egypt was increasing in popularity as a travel destination for European visitors. British explorer William John Bankes (1786–1855) recorded monuments and hieroglyphs during his two voyages to Egypt in 1815 and 1818. Near Aswan, he identified the hieroglyphic cartouches of Ptolemy and Cleopatra on an obelisk from Philae. Bankes later had the obelisk removed and transported to his country home in Kingston Lacy, Dorset, where it still stands.

The race to decipherment

About 1820, England, stone

British Museum, EA55204/AESAr.1079

About 1821, England, paper (left)

Kingston Lacy, The Bankes Collection (on long term loan from the National Trust to Dorset History Centre)

1821, London, paper (right)

British Museum, AESAr.26

[Tabletop inscription]

Nov 1815

Bankes discovers an obelisk with the names
Ptolemy and Cleopatra

In search of hieroglyphs

Keen to increase his sources, Young approached Bankes, a close friend, for help. This letter to Bankes' father contains instructions for Bankes to copy inscriptions whilst in Egypt. It also outlines some of what Young had already achieved.

1818, London, paper (right)
British Museum, AESAr.387

[Picture caption] The Dream Stela between the paws of the Great Sphinx.

© Ilona Regulski

Old dreams, new discoveries

As the race to decipherment intensified, travellers gathered more inscriptions for scholars to work on. British Consul and artist Henry Salt (1780–1827) skilfully copied a stela situated between the front paws of the Great Sphinx. In the text, the Sphinx appears before Prince Thutmose IV in a dream, offering him the throne if only he would remove the sand engulfing his body.

1817, Egypt, paper
British Museum, AESAr.731

Priceless resources

Drawings by travellers to Egypt were of vital importance to Champollion and his peers as they provided new data. This ancient Egyptian depiction of ‘the lady of the house and chief chantress of Montu’ Nestjerenmaat was painted by Alessandro Ricci (1792–1834), an Italian artist who worked for Bankes and Salt. Nestjerenmaat is seen raising her hands in adoration of the god Ra-Horakhty.

1069–747 BC, Thebes, wood and plaster
British Museum, EA8450

1818, Egypt, paper
British Museum, AESAr.1520

Voices of Rashid

[It looks like] a cookie!

Fatma, 12 years old

The importance of accuracy

Champollion had high regard for expert copyist Frédéric Cailliaud (1787–1869), whose sketches arrived in France in November 1818. These objects highlight the incredible accuracy of his work, years before hieroglyphs could be read: a cylinder seal inscribed with the name of King Pepy I, and funerary cones stamped with the names of the deceased, once set into the façade of tomb chapels.

About 1818, France, paper
Musée Dobrée – Grand patrimoine de Loire-Atlantique

2321–2287 BC, Asyut, glazed composition
British Museum, EA47460

747–332 BC, Egypt, pottery
British Museum, EA35651, EA35658, EA35672

[Tabletop inscription]

1819

The race to decipherment

Young discusses sound-based signs in Greek and Roman royal names

Sounds and symbols

Young's notes show that he made significant advances in the understanding of demotic, demonstrating correctly that the script was made up of both ideographic (words or ideas) and phonetic (sound) signs. But he remained convinced that sound-based writing had only entered the Egyptian writing system with Greek influence.

In his 1819 article for *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Young discusses his reading of 'Ptolemy' as *p – t – lo/ole – m(a) – ile – osh/is*.

1814, London, paper (left)
British Library, Ms. ADD 27282, f77

1819, London, paper (right)
British Museum, RBC.8°.YOU

[Tabletop inscription]

Aug 1821

Champollion agrees there are sound signs in foreign royal names

On the verge of a breakthrough

On this stela, the high priest Pasherenptah's autobiographical text recounts the coronation of Cleopatra's father Ptolemy XII in 76 BC. Champollion noticed that 'Cleopatra' had 4 letters in common with 'Ptolemy'. The third, lion-like sign in Ptolemy's cartouche was the same as the second sign in Cleopatra's. Young's syllabic reading of 'ole' for this sign was thus wrong; it must be the alphabetic letter 'l'.

41 BC, Saqqara, limestone
British Museum, EA886

The race to decipherment

[Tabletop inscription]

Sept 1822



Champollion cracks the hieroglyphic code

‘Je tiens l’affaire, vois!’

On 14 September 1822, 32-year-old Champollion excitedly visited his brother. Waving his notes in the air, he gasped, ‘Look, I’ve got it!’ before promptly collapsing. The notes formed the basis of a historic letter to his colleague Bon-Joseph Dacier in which Champollion outlined his findings on the translations of royal names, and the reasoning behind them. This is considered the moment of decipherment.

1822, Paris, paper
British Museum, RBC.CHA

The true breakthrough

Champollion theorised that if spelling based on pronunciation was present at any time, it must have been there from the start. He tested a name that combined a sun disc ☉, tied fox skins  and two door bolts . Champollion knew the last signs meant 's' from 'Ptolmys', and the sun disc was 'ra' in Coptic. *Ra* – ? – *ss* then must be 'Ramesses', who was known from the Bible. On the stone inscription before you, the seated god Ra replaces the sun disc, and a vertical s-sign (a folded cloth) the door bolts.

1184–1153 BC, Egypt, limestone
British Museum, EA1344

About 1824, Paris, paper
National Library of France, Department of Manuscripts, NAF
20337

Voices of Rashid 

It could be a plane, a missile, a fire extinguisher,

The race to decipherment

lampshades, or a light bulb, but it's actually [a] cartouche.

Hana, 12 years old

Testing the key


 and  reappeared in another name:   

Champollion knew the ibis as Thoth's sacred animal. The three signs together then must be *Thot – m – s*, the great ruler Thutmose mentioned by classical authors. He was correct, apart from one small mistake. The middle character is the two-letter sign 'ms', the following 's' stresses the pronunciation.

1504–1492 BC, Deir el-Bahari, limestone
British Museum, EA1456

Further confirmation

Champollion was now certain that the hieroglyphic script represented spoken language throughout Egyptian history. He translated a cartouche

containing the hieroglyphs 
as King Taharqa (690–664 BC), whom he already
knew from inscriptions at Naga and Gebel Barkal
in Sudan.

690–664 BC, Egypt, bronze
British Museum, EA5311

A mixed system

Champollion had unravelled the nature of Egyptian writing: purely phonetic (sound) signs were used alongside signs representing words (Ra and Thoth). He succeeded in reading earlier foreign names, such as Xerxes, the Persian king who occupied Egypt between 485 and 465 BC.

Below the hieroglyphs on the vessel there is also a cuneiform translation representing the Persian, Median, and Assyrian languages.

485–465 BC, Halicarnassus, Egyptian alabaster
British Museum, 132114

Common names

Champollion expected a sign to indicate common names, just as the cartouche designated royal names, and identified the seated man sign. In this stela, the seated man appears near the end of line two, after Horiraa's name. The first sign in line three is the feminine equivalent sign, classifying the now-lost name of his mother.

380–30 BC, Memphis, limestone
British Museum, EA20945

[Projected text on wall]

If I have one counsel to give you, it is not to communicate too much of your discoveries to Champollion. It could happen that he would then claim priority.

Antoine Isaac Sylvestre de Sacy to Thomas Young, 1815

[Champollion] has been wonderfully successful... How far he will acknowledge everything which he

has either borrowed or might have borrowed from me I am not quite confident.

Thomas Young in an 1823 publication

So the poor Dr Young is incorrigible? Why stir up old matter that is already mummified?

Jean-François Champollion to his brother Jacques Joseph, 1829

The Briton [Young] can do as he pleases — it shall be ours: and all of old England will learn from young France to spell hieroglyphs by a totally different method.

Jean-François Champollion to his brother Jacques Joseph, 1829

You will be surprised to hear that I have become a complete convert to Mons. Champollion fils' system of explaining the hieroglyphs.

Henry Salt to William Hamilton, 1824

The race to decipherment

[Inscription on table near projected text]

1823

Young and Champollion dispute over who correctly identified sound signs first

[Labels left to right]

A muddled legacy

Champollion often relied on the work of others, such as this drawing by John Gardner Wilkinson showing inscriptions at Philae, but some believed he overlooked these contributions to his success. In his famous 1824 '*Précis*' which summarised the hieroglyphic system, Champollion would finally acknowledge Young's correct identification of several sound signs in 'Ptolemy' and 'Berenice'.

1821–1822, Philae, paper (top)

National Trust Collections, Calke Abbey (The Harpur Crewe Collection (acquired with the help of the National Heritage

Memorial Fund by The National Trust in 1985))

Further controversy

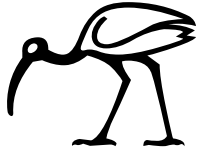
The ancient Greek at the top of this papyrus translates the contents of a demotic text once owned by the traveller Casati, a facsimile of which is below. Describing the sale of a share of income from tombs at Thebes, the mention of two witnesses became another source of contention between Champollion and Young.

Champollion had read the names in the Casati papyrus as 'Antiochus' and 'Antigonos', but the Greek text identified them as 'Antimachus' and 'Antigenis'. For Young, this was clear proof of Champollion's inaccurate readings.

153 BC, Hermonthis, papyrus (centre)
The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Egypt
a.4(P)

1800–1850, Paris, cardboard (bottom)
British Museum, EA10396

[Interactive trail behind]

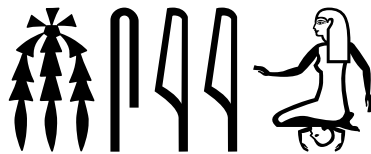


Ancient Egyptians had clever sayings, just like we do.

Look at the two words you've learned already:



No one



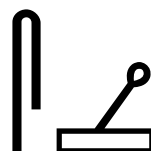
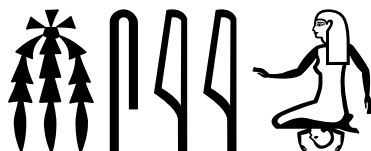
is born



...

Spin the block to find the last word of this ancient Egyptian saying.

Lift flap for answer



'No one is born wise.' *Teaching of Ptahhotep*

Great job! You're an Egyptologist in the making!

[Label on table near projected text]

Unlocking Egypt

Champollion continued to develop his ideas over the next five years, proclaiming on 1 January 1829 that there was nothing further to add to his alphabet as it could be applied successfully to all the monuments of Egypt. He was the first to grasp the structural logic of the ancient Egyptian language in its varied forms. Champollion's grammar was the product of a long journey towards decipherment, and was published posthumously from his notes by his older brother Jacques Joseph. Through it, he provided the tools for further exploration.

1836, Paris, paper (top)
British Museum, RBC.4°.CHA

After 1822, Paris, paper (bottom)
National Library of France, Department of Manuscripts,
NAF 20345

[Section introduction on left of threshold to next room]

Rediscovering ancient Egypt

Champollion continually refined his understanding of hieroglyphs until his death in 1832, his health further weakened by a scientific expedition to Egypt for more material. Over the next two hundred years, scholars from across the world would continue his work. Thanks to these efforts, we now know how to read ancient Egyptian texts. Every new translation gives us fresh insight into how ancient Egyptians once lived and experienced the world.

[Display case on right of section panel, labels left to right]

Egypt at last

From 1828 to 1829, Champollion and his friend Italian Egyptologist Ippolito Rosellini undertook a joint expedition to Egypt. They visited many monuments Champollion knew only from drawings and descriptions, such as the tomb of King Sety I. Its beautifully coloured reliefs had been painted in watercolour by artist Henry William Beechey.

When the tomb was found in 1817, it was thought to belong to King Psamtek I, but Champollion correctly deciphered the name 'Sety'. He also identified the goose as 'son' in the title 'son of Ra', as seen on this doorjamb from the tomb.

About 1818, Thebes, paper (back)
British Museum, AESAr.278

1294–1279 BC, Valley of the Kings, limestone
British Museum, EA884

Collecting hieroglyphs

Champollion's decipherment of hieroglyphs made a fundamental difference between what had been accomplished previously and what the expedition could hope to achieve. They now held the key to translate unseen texts. Based on the expedition's work, Rosellini filed each hieroglyph in preparation for his own dictionary.

After 1828, Pisa, wood and paper
Biblioteca Universitaria di Pisa – Ministero della Cultura –
Italia, Box 3

Hieroglyphs in Arabic

The first modern attempt to create an Arabic dictionary of hieroglyphs was undertaken by Ahmed Kamal Pasha (1851–1923), the first Egyptian curator of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. The dictionary was never published but his notes were recently donated to the Bibliotheca Alexandrina by his family. The page above shows

words starting with the 'sh' sound.

© Bibliotheca Alexandrina 2022

[Picture caption] Ahmed Kamal Pasha, the first Egyptian Egyptologist to write a hieroglyphic dictionary.

© Bibliotheca Alexandrina 2022

The Franco-Tuscan expedition

The expedition recorded inscriptions and collected objects through excavations. The French and Italian teams covered more ground by dividing the work and copying each other's results, ultimately producing two identical sets of drawings and notes. This drawing of birds identified by their hieroglyphic names is an Italian copy of the French original.

1828–1829, Egypt, paper

Biblioteca Universitaria di Pisa – Ministero della Cultura – Italia, Ms.272-c133

Treasures for the Louvre

Champollion remained in Egypt on expedition for a year and a half, before returning to France with 100 pieces for the museum that would become the Louvre. The objects, acquired with permission from the Ottoman authorities in Egypt, still bear his identification marks. Amongst them was this box belonging to the draughtsman Ptahmes with images of funerary servants and the four sons of Horus.

1550–1295 BC, Egypt, wood
Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités égyptiennes, N 2692

[Display case opposite, labels left to right]

Dynasties of Egypt

Egyptian history is traditionally subdivided into 31 dynasties grouped into periods which reflect the political landscape of Egypt, including phases

of internal stability and conflict.

A chronicle of kings

The Abydos King List was discovered and copied by William John Bankes in 1818, but he refused to share his notes with Champollion, deeming the latter a ‘dirty scoundrel’ for having failed to acknowledge his role in the earlier decipherment of ‘Cleopatra’. Champollion may have used other drawings such as this 1821–22 copy by John Gardner Wilkinson.

1821–1822, Abydos, paper

National Trust Collections, Calke Abbey (The Harpur Crewe Collection (acquired with the help of the National Heritage Memorial Fund by The National Trust in 1985))

[Picture caption] Pastel drawing of Champollion in Egyptian dress by fellow expedition member Giuseppe Angelilli, 1828.

© Private collection, with permission of the owner

Rediscovering ancient Egypt

My moustache, black to please and already very respectable, helps to orientalise my face. I took, moreover, the habits and customs of the country, strong coffee and three sessions of pipe per day.

Jean-François Champollion writing to his brother Jacques-Joseph from Egypt in 1828.

Recognising Egyptian history

The Abydos King List once adorned the stunning temple of Ramesses II, recording thirty-four royal names in chronological order. By excluding foreign kings, female rulers and 'heretic' royalty, Ramesses created his own version of history.

Champollion studied the list alongside another record of kings, the Turin Royal Canon, uncovering thousands more years of Egyptian history. He relied on copies made by travellers until he was finally able to examine the King List himself during an expedition to Egypt.

About 1250 BC, Abydos, limestone

British Museum, EA117

[Picture caption] Fragments of the Turin Royal Canon, a hieratic papyrus probably from the reign of Ramesses II (1279–1213 BC).

© Torino, Museo Egizio

[Label for scenery projections]

Landscapes of Egypt

Walk along the banks of the river Nile, pay your respects at the necropolis and stand in awe in the shadows of a royal temple. As you do so, listen to the sounds of ancient Egypt come alive.

Images © Amen Moawad/ EyeEm; Paul Smit

[Subsection introduction on display case far left of threshold]

Pharaoh and empire

Mesmerising new stories of a sprawling ancient multicultural society with colonial ambitions became accessible with the decipherment of hieroglyphs. Travellers and traders from the ancient Mediterranean to the Indian subcontinent came to Egypt, bringing their languages and cultures with them. Some left a profound and lasting impression on Egyptian culture and its writing system. But it was the introduction of Greek that would eventually lead towards the abandonment of ancient Egyptian scripts.

[Display case, left of subsection introduction]

A tale of caution

When Champollion first discovered the *Teaching of King Amenemhat*, he failed to recognise the literary character of the text, interpreting it as a true historical account. In the fictional story, the dead king vividly describes how he was murdered by his bodyguards and instructs his son to trust no one.

1295–1186 BC, Egypt, papyrus
British Museum, EA10182,1

Weapons intended for my protection were raised against me, while I acted like a snake of the necropolis.

I woke up to the fighting, pulled myself together, and found that it was an attack of the palace guard.

Quote from the *Teaching of King Amenemhat*

[Display case opposite, labels left to right]

Order and chaos

In the ancient Egyptian worldview, foreigners represented chaos and disorder, and their defeat became a popular topic in writing and art. The subject was especially favoured by Egypt's first kings. This tiny ancient label shows King Den striking an enemy with the written explanation: 'First occasion of smiting the East'. Lands east of Egypt's borders were considered enduring enemies.

About 2985 BC, Abydos, ivory
British Museum, EA55586

The Tale of Sinuhe

While on expedition to Libya, the royal official Sinuhe learns of King Amenemhat I's murder and flees to Canaan (present-day Palestine). He builds a successful career abroad but remains restless

until he is allowed to return home. The fictional *Tale of Sinuhe* is one of the finest works of ancient Egyptian literature and is still being adapted for the stage today.

1295–1186 BC, Thebes, limestone
British Museum, EA5629

Policing the desert

The Egyptians employed the Medjau, a local semi-nomadic people, to patrol the deserts to the east. They secured desert roads and borders, and wealthy temples and cemeteries, often located at the desert edge. Nebhepetra was a priest at the royal palace in Thebes, but he also doubled as a *medja* guarding the temple of Karnak.

About 1800–1900 BC, Thebes, serpentine
British Museum, EA83921

Occupation of Nubia

To the south, Egypt conquered Wawat in Nubia,

Rediscovering ancient Egypt

securing access to and exploiting valuable African resources such as gold, gemstones, minerals and ivory. Champollion used this drawing whilst working in France to understand details of the conquest described on the stela behind, erected by army commander Intef-Dedu. Two such stone slabs were displayed in the temple at the massive fortress of Buhen in modern Northern Sudan.

1965–1920 BC, Buhen, sandstone
British Museum, EA1177

1819, Buhen, paper
Kingston Lacy, The Bankes Collection (on long term loan from the National Trust to Dorset History Centre)

Archaeological Sudan

Scan the code for a secret glimpse into Kurgus, an important archaeological site in Sudan, where remarkable inscriptions reveal the southern edge of Egypt's ancient empire.



britishmuseum.org/sudan

Settlement

As Egypt's rule expanded southwards, soldiers began to settle more permanently around the Nubian fortresses. The complex interactions between both cultures can be seen in the objects found at Buhen. Local materials were often used to create Egyptian designs such as these bowls, or this doorjamb inscribed with the name of Thutmose III. Communities continued to live there until the creation of Lake Nasser submerged the site in 1964.

1985–1795 BC, Buhen, ceramic (left)
British Museum, EA65695

2055–1600 BC, Buhen, ceramic (centre)
British Museum, EA65701

Rediscovering ancient Egypt

1479–1425 BC, Buhen, sandstone (right)
British Museum, EA1019

[Picture caption] The fortress of Buhen pictured in 1960, shortly before it was submerged by the construction of a new dam.

© UNESCO

[Labels left to right]

Rewriting conquest

By 1700 BC, foreign rulers from the ancient Middle East had conquered northern Egypt and extended their influence up the Nile from their capital Avaris in the eastern Delta. They were known as Hyksos, a word derived from the ancient Egyptian term *heqau khasut* meaning ‘rulers from foreign lands’.

As the new kings of Egypt, they wrote their names in cartouches: ‘Apepi’ is inscribed on this vessel

fragment while 'Kayan' and 'Yakubher' appear on the scarabs.

About 1555 BC, Tell el-Yahudiya, chert (left)
British Museum, EA32069

About 1600 BC, Saqqara, glazed steatite (front centre)
British Museum, EA30500

1650–1550 BC, Egypt, glazed steatite (right)
British Museum, EA40741

Egypt reunited

The Hyksos were defeated by King Ahmose, who reunited Egypt around 1540 BC. This oldest known royal shabti – a type of funerary statuette – is a rare surviving image of him. Champollion was the first modern scholar to identify Ahmose as the founder of the prosperous 18th Dynasty (1550–1295 BC). We now know that his predecessor Kamose helped pave the way to victory by fighting decisive battles.

About 1550 BC, Thebes, limestone
British Museum, EA32191

A new enemy

Successful battles enhanced Egypt's military confidence. The defeat of enemies became an established literary and decorative theme. After 1300 BC, foreign invasion came from an unexpected part of the ancient world – Libya. An 'idealised' version of the conflict is depicted on the walls of Karnak temple, as King Sety I ruthlessly slaughters the Libyan chief and tramples his people.

1830–1849, Karnak, plaster cast (back)
British Museum, EA91038a-o

Expanding the empire

In one of the ancient world's largest chariot battles, fought in 1275 BC, Ramesses II tried to seize Syria from the powerful Hittites and recapture the city of Qadesh. Both sides would claim victory. When Champollion read this ancient poem, he discovered the names of foreign peoples

encountered by the Egyptians during the battle, including Ionians, Lycians, Ethiopians and Arabs.

1274–1186 BC, Egypt, papyrus
British Museum, EA10181,1

Claiming victory


A large commemorative relief in his royal temple at Abu Simbel depicts Ramesses II benevolently receiving suppliants after the conclusion of the Battle of Qadesh. This watercolour copy is by Salvatore Cherubini (1797–1869), one of the five illustrators of the Franco-Tuscan expedition to Egypt.

1829–28, Egypt, paper
Biblioteca Universitaria di Pisa – Ministero della Cultura – Italia, Ms_300_2_c130-132

The rise of pharaoh

This is the only known seated statue of the pharaoh Sety II. His royal names are inscribed

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on his shoulders and below his feet. He holds a ram's head representing the god Amun. During the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BC), Egypt's ruler began to be identified by his residential palace, the 'Great House', or  (pronounced *per-aa*), which evolved into the recognisable 'pharaoh'.

1200–1194 BC, Thebes, quartzite
British Museum, EA26

A rare find

In 2016, the British Museum was able to purchase a unique record of silver payments in 'abnormal hieratic', an almost illegible form of cursive writing. The papyrus mentions the Kushite king Taharqa and was purchased by scholar Alexandre de Vaucelles (1798–1851) during his 1826 voyage through Egypt. In preparation for his journey, de Vaucelles learned hieroglyphs.

690–664 BC, Thebes, papyrus
British Museum, EA87512,1-2

Nubian strength

From 800 BC onwards, Egypt was frequently ruled by foreign empires. King Piankhy's victory stela recounts how Egypt was conquered by the Nubian state, creating a major power whose only rival in the ancient Middle East was Assyria. The original from Gebel Barkal in Sudan is now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

1891, Cairo, plaster cast (back)
British Museum, EA1121

The end of native rule

The final centuries of pharaonic rule were a period of great unrest (747–332 BC). Obscure rulers, sometimes of foreign origin themselves, fought for Egypt's fading independence. For example, King Hakor may not have been a native Egyptian but instead from a North Arabian nomadic tribe. This is a fragment from his statue.

393–380 BC, Tell Basta, limestone

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British Museum, EA1825

[Display case to right and behind, labels right to left]

Foreign languages

Egypt had close trade relationships with the island of Crete. The hieratic inscription on this writing board reads: 'Making the names of the Keftiw' (Cretans). These phonetic spellings of Cretan names provide a glimpse of the language spoken in Crete and show how foreign words were accurately recorded.

1550–1069 BC, Egypt, wood (front)
British Museum, EA5647

Diplomatic correspondence

Wedge-shaped cuneiform originating from Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) was the first foreign script encountered by the Egyptians. Many

examples were found in Amarna, the capital city of King Akhenaten, and are letters from rulers of the lands north of Egypt. In this message, King Tushratta of Mitanni negotiates a royal marriage between his daughter and King Amenhotep III.

About 1350 BC, Amarna, clay (back)
British Museum, E29793

Persian influence

The first Persian rule over Egypt (526–401 BC) introduced several new languages written in cuneiform. Though the text on this cylinder seal may look uniform, the inscription is in fact written in three languages: Old Persian, Elamite and Babylonian. A reference to King Darius I suggests the seal was probably brought to Egypt by an official from the royal centres of Persepolis or Susa (present-day Iran).

522–486 BC, Thebes, chalcedony or prase
British Museum, 89132

Alphabetic influence

Scribal traditions brought from the ancient Middle East introduced an alphabetic sequence for arranging Egyptian words. As early as the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BC), words could be ordered according to their first letter. This fragment of a demotic text lists personal names starting with the letter 'h'.

400–250 BC, Egypt, papyrus (back right)
British Museum, EA10852

A common language

Wrongly identified as Phoenician when it was discovered in 1704, this Aramaic funerary poem accompanies an image of the deceased woman Taba on her deathbed. She is surrounded by four deities in typical ancient Egyptian iconography. Aramaic was a common language of the ancient Middle East, rendered in a simple alphabet of twenty-two signs.

450–300 BC, Memphis, limestone

Carpentras, Bibliothèque-musée Inguimbertaine, 2007.0.16

The origins of Coptic

As Greek became more dominant in Egypt, older texts could be rendered in a Greek script to help with pronunciation. The papyrus above demonstrates an early part of this process. First, the nearest approximation in the Greek alphabet was used, for example θ for 'th'. Later, demotic signs were added to express those Egyptian sounds that did not exist in Greek.

About 100–200 AD, Oxyrhynchus, papyrus (back left)
British Museum, EA10808

Early alphabet

The base of the sphinx displays early alphabetic signs beneath the Egyptian hieroglyphs. This script called Proto-Sinaitic is an ancestor of the Latin alphabet. It was probably used by local people working as guides or traders in the Sinai

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desert.

About 1800 BC, Serabit el-Khadim, sandstone
British Museum, EA41748

A cultural hub

The most profound encounter with a foreign language began about 650 BC with the arrival of Greek-speaking immigrants, predominantly mercenaries and traders. They mainly settled in northern Egypt, for example at the port and trading city of Naukratis.

A fragment of a drinking cup dedicated by Aigyptis ('the Egyptian' in Greek) was found there in the temple of Aphrodite. Could she have been one of the 'peculiarly alluring' sex workers the city was famed for? Other objects such as Aramaic stamp seals and Latin-stamped amphora handles indicate foreign presence and trade networks.

About 500–400 BC, Naukratis, copper alloy (right)
British Museum, 1886,0401.1706

About 130–50 BC, Naukratis (made in Brindisi, Italy),
ceramic (left)

British Museum, 1955,0920.89

About 575–550 BC, Naukratis (made in Chios, Greece),
ceramic (centre)

British Museum, 1924,1201.755

Shared beliefs

Greeks and other foreigners lived in Naukratis long before the arrival of Alexander the Great. Temples dedicated to Egyptian gods operated next to Greek sanctuaries, and foreign residents supported the local cult of the cat-goddess Bastet, known as Bubastis in Greek.

These statues were probably intended as dedications to her. The upright cat sits in typical Egyptian fashion while the base accompanying the Greek-style skulking cat reads: 'Galateia daughter of Theodotos to Bubastis'.

'Cat' in ancient Egyptian is 'mioew'.

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266–227 BC, Naukratis, limestone
British Museum, 1905,0612.3

325–225 BC, Naukratis, Greek (Parian) marble
British Museum, 1905,0612.7

325–250 BC, Naukratis, limestone
British Museum, 1905,0612.20

[Subsection introduction at end of display case to left]

The concept of time

Champollion did not just decipher a writing system: he uncovered one of the oldest written languages in human history. This achievement revealed how the Egyptians measured time, organised the year, and commemorated ancestors – or erased them from history. A wealth of written sources confirms a deep appreciation by the ancient Egyptians for their past.

[Labels on right of case, left to right]

The invention of writing

This pottery fragment shows the oldest Egyptian text in the British Museum and dates to 3100 BC. It mentions both 'accounts from Upper Egypt' and the name Sekhen/Ka, who ruled there just before the unification of Egypt's regions into one state. Writing in Egypt was 'invented' around 3250 BC to organise the distribution and storage of goods as society became more complex.

About 3100 BC, Abydos, pottery
British Museum, EA35508

Great ones of the past

Authorship was rarely attributed in ancient Egypt, but this papyrus commemorates eight 'great' authors of the past: 'Is there any here like Hordedef? Is there another like Imhotep ... Neferti and Khety ... Ptahemdjehuty and

Khakheperreseneb ... Ptahhotep or Kaires?’

These learned scribes supposedly foretold the future through their exquisite writings, thus securing their ever-lasting memory.

1295–1186 BC, Deir el-Medina, papyrus (top)
British Museum, EA10684,5

Wise teachings

Some scribes were well known from ‘Teachings’ or ‘Instructions’. These writings discussed moral principles in the form of short sayings and warnings and were often copied. *The Loyalist Teaching of Kaires* addresses hierarchy and the dependence of the elite on their subordinates: ‘an overworked field-labourer will run away, so a harsh master ultimately undermines his own success’.

1295–1069 BC, Deir el-Medina, limestone
British Museum, EA5632

Poetic delight

Khakheperreseneb's soul-searching and heartfelt poem on language was copied over and over on writing boards like this to teach new generations of scribes vocabulary and writing: 'If only I had unknown utterances, and extraordinary verses, in a new language that does not pass away, free from repetition, without a verse of worn-out speech, spoken by the ancestors!'

1550–1350 BC, Egypt, wood and plaster
British Museum, EA5645

Expelled from history

Some individuals were forgotten about or deliberately erased from memory. A disliked individual's name or image might be violently obliterated or hacked out, as seen on this statue. In other cases, names were altered or erased because they were no longer needed, or because an object needed to be re-used.

1390–1352 BC, limestone, Egypt
British Museum, EA24430

Starry nights

As their name suggests, star clocks used stars to determine the time. First appearing inside coffin lids around 2100 BC, the clocks measured the motion of groups of stars that appeared in the eastern sky at dawn every ten days. Arranged in grids of 36 intervals, each interval had 12 stars, one for every hour of the night.

About 240 BC, Thebes, wood and pigment (back)
British Museum, EA6678

Celebrating the New Year

The Egyptian year was organised according to seasonal Nile River cycles, which dictated dates for ploughing, harvesting, and celebrating festivals. This statue group for the parents of Iymhotep bears a feast list on the back, including the Opening of the Year, New Year's Day, Full and

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Half Moon Festivals, the Thoth Feast, and the Festival of Sokar.

The joy of these festivals was expressed through drunkenness and offerings of Nile water and perfume in vessels such as this New Year's flask.

747–332 BC, Egypt, wood (left)
British Museum, EA41516

664–525 BC, Thebes, glazed composition (right)
British Museum, EA4770

Keeping time

The ancient Egyptians divided days into 24 hours using timekeeping devices such as water clocks. Marks on the inside served to measure each hour as the water dripped out. Decorations often showed the king making offerings to deities, suggesting that these clocks were used by priests for timekeeping during nocturnal temple rituals.

About 320 BC, Tell el-Yahudiya, basalt
British Museum, EA938

Calendar of Lucky and Unlucky Days

Champollion discovered that the ancient Egyptian year was divided into 12 months of 30 days and 3 seasons – Akhet (flooding), Peret (growing), and Shemu (harvest). Every day had mythological significance and calendars were drawn up to specify days as lucky or unlucky, good or bad. The above papyrus shows days in the Peret season.

1295–1186 BC, Thebes, papyrus (top)
British Museum, EA10184,6

[Display case behind, labels left to right]

Keeping traditions alive

Egyptian texts, art and architecture were often influenced by past trends. The block statue was one of the longest-surviving types of non-royal sculpture in ancient Egypt, providing artists of old with a link to even more bygone times. Such statues depict a person seated with their knees

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drawn up to their chest, usually with their body concealed in a cloak.

The design was invented around 1900 BC and copied throughout Egyptian history, as these examples show. Inscriptions identify the individuals from left to right as Sahathor, Kamose, Parenu, Wahibra and Padiamennebnesuttawy.

1. About 1900 BC, Abydos, limestone
British Museum, EA570

2. About 1400 BC, Egypt, granodiorite
British Museum, EA1210

3. 1295–1069 BC, Egypt, limestone
British Museum, EA1085

4. About 595–525 BC, Sais, granodiorite
Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités égyptiennes, A 91

5. 332–30 BC, Karnak, black granite
British Museum, EA48035

Voices of Rashid

He looks like he is sad.

Rahma, 12 years old

Please touch

Types of granite, a hard stone commonly used to create block statues

[Subsection introduction on wall to left]

Spirituality and the afterlife

Like many other cultures, Egyptians saw death as a natural progression into another state of being. Preparation for death was essential to preserve the future well-being of one's soul. As perhaps the most powerful and prevalent force driving ancient Egyptian culture, the concept of the afterlife influenced objects, architecture and imagery alike. Yet insight into what really happened in the lives and deaths of ancient Egyptians was long hampered by a lack of understanding of their texts.

[Display cases to left, labels right to left]

[Picture caption] The falcon and jackal-headed jars, drawn in 1719 by French Benedictine monk Dom Bernard de Montfaucon.

© Bibliothèque nationale de France

Preserved for the afterlife

Canopic jars preserved the organs of the deceased. The inscriptions on these jars record the name of the owner, Ahmose, as well as the relevant protective deity. Imset, the human-headed god, preserved the liver, jackal-headed Duamutef protected the stomach, baboon-headed Hapi cared for the lungs, while the falcon-headed Qebehsenuef looked after the intestines. This is the first time the jars have been reunited since the mid-1700s.

747–332 BC, Egypt, calcite
Musée Calvet, Avignon, no. 115

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Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités égyptiennes, E. 13137

National Museums Liverpool, Lady Lever Art Gallery, from the Collection of 1st Viscount Leverhulme, LL 5134a & LL 5135, LL 5136 & LL 5137

[Picture caption] This translation of Champollion's now lost 1823 letter shows his readings of the hieroglyphs on the cartonnage.

Courtesy of the Natural History Society of Northumbria.
Image © Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums

Baketenhor travels to England

When the mummified remains of Baketenhor arrived in Newcastle in 1821, onlookers eagerly requested an unwrapping. Fortunately, they were denied, saving her beautiful cartonnage – a protective cover made from plastered layers of fibre, papyrus or linen, sometimes coated in resin. In 1823, Champollion identified the inscription as a prayer addressed to several deities for the soul of the deceased. A recent medical scan revealed she

died between the ages of 25 and 35.

945–715 BC, Egypt, human remains, organic

Courtesy of the Natural History Society of Northumbria

Book of the Dead

Karl Richard Lepsius (1810–1884), the father of German Egyptology, influenced public discourse with his 1842 translation of a guide for the afterlife entitled *Book of the Dead*. Though the term is still extensively used, it is neither a book nor a fixed text. Instead, people commissioned a personal selection of religious and magical spells to be read out loud during their burial. This abbreviated compilation belonged to lady Djedmutiuesankh and was studied and signed by Champollion in 1827.

1069–715 BC, Thebes, papyrus

Private collection of David and Molly Lowell Borthwick

Soul searching

Funerary texts identified different parts of the soul: intellect (*akh*), essence (*ka*), and personality (*ba*). Certain burial rituals focused on reuniting the body with its *ba*, which flew away upon death. This is why the *ba* was often depicted as a human-headed bird. A reunion was essential for a person to be reborn in the next life.

747–30 BC, Egypt, wood (top)
British Museum, EA61884

[Picture caption] Letter from General Piankh to his mother Queen Nedjemet regarding a murder plot the two had arranged.

© Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – ÄMP, P. Berlin 10489,
photo: S. Steiß

A doomed soul

Nedjmet, the unscrupulous owner of this Book of the Dead, coordinated the murder of two

policemen. If revealed on judgement day, there is little doubt her sins would have led to her eternal damnation. But in this papyrus, she brazenly waits by the scales of justice for her heart to be weighed against Maat, the goddess of truth. Maat is represented in Egyptian iconography as a feather or as a seated goddess with a feather on her head.

About 1070 BC, Egypt, papyrus
British Museum, EA10541

747–332 BC, Egypt, copper alloy
British Museum, EA60383

Silence heart!

Final judgement before a tribunal in the afterlife was an important part of the burial ritual. Heart amulets were often buried with the deceased, sometimes wrapped inside the mummy bandages, to provide additional protection during judgement. Some amulets bore a spell from the Book of the Dead that urged the deceased's heart: 'Do not

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stand as a witness! Do not oppose me in the tribunal! Do not show your hostility against me before the Keeper of the Balance!’

1350–1250 BC, Egypt, jasper (left)
British Museum, EA15619

Egypt, red jasper (centre)
British Museum, EA8090

Egypt, breccia (right)
British Museum, EA24393

Book of the Dead

Spells from the Book of the Dead were meant to be spoken aloud. Because many of the precise sounds of the Egyptian language are not known (including vowels, which are never recorded in hieroglyphic writing), this recitation is only an approximation.

Duration: 2 minutes 40 seconds

The idea of life after death occupied the minds

of the ancient Egyptians, leaving us with masterpieces of magnificent buildings and rich texts. In many aspects, ancient Egypt is still present in the consciousness of modern Egyptians today.

Dr Khaled Hassan Abd el-Aziz
Associate Professor of Egyptology, Cairo University

[Wall text, left to right, top to bottom]

Ra-Horakhty – the sun god Ra, Horus of the Two Horizons. In front of him is a table laden with offerings.

Hymns in honour of Ra-Horakhty, titled in red. This one reads: ‘Adoring Ra as he rises from the eastern horizon of the sky’.

The couple worship Osiris, god of the afterlife, in front of tables laden with offerings.

Baboons greet the morning sun, who is helped

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to rise by an ankh with arms. The ankh was the symbol of life.

The journey to the afterlife begins with a funeral procession across the river Nile to the 'beautiful west'. The body is then transported by sledge to a tomb.

Nedjmet plays the game *senet*, symbolising the passage of her life force *ka* to the afterlife.

Nedjmet's *ba* – her soul in bird form – and Herihor worship two lions: yesterday and tomorrow. In the present, the sun rises.

Husband and wife King Herihor and Queen Nedjmet worship Ra-Horakhty. This Book of the Dead belonged to Queen Nedjmet.

Goddess of justice Maat sits on the left scale while Nedjmet is weighed across from her on the right. The god of writing, Thoth, records the result.

A spell intended to be ‘spoken over this image which is written on fresh papyrus ... and placed at the breast of the blessed dead to prevent an approach to his body’.

The title of this spell reads: ‘Going out by day, taking any form desired to be taken’. The deceased could change their appearance upon entering the afterlife.

[Display cases, labels right to left]

Digital insight

Though papyrus sheets are now often kept in frames, the densely rolled papyrus on the left shows how they would once have been stored in tombs. Resin stains suggest that this particular papyrus was placed close to a mummy.

To prevent damage through unrolling, non-destructive scanning methods are now being

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used. They reveal that the righthand papyrus is made up of tiny fragments from different sheets, a tactic probably used by later dealers to increase sales value. They also show areas where different types of ink were used, visible as white patches in the cross-section scan of the left-hand papyrus.

1069 BC – AD 395, Thebes, papyrus (left)
British Museum, EA10748

1550–1069 BC, Egypt, papyrus and linen (right)
British Museum, EA76548

[Picture caption] Scans can sometimes even identify individual hieroglyphs.

Emilie Cazin / Benjamin Moreno
© Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

Life after life

The afterlife was an idealised version of Egypt where people could continue their earthly activities. To avoid having to work, people were buried with magical figures who took their place

when labour was required. Called shabtis, the word derives from 'weshebti', meaning 'answerer'. The writing identifies this shabti's owner as 'Osiris Tarudj, born of Tentmen'.

664–525 BC, Saqqara, glazed composition\
British Museum, EA9180

Help from the grave

Letters to the dead were prompted by unfortunate events in the lives of those they had left behind. Recipients were requested to stop harming the living or to intercede with a fellow spirit suspected of causing trouble. The letters were recited and left in tombs. Here, Shepsi complains to his late parents about his inheritance issues.

2181–2125 BC, Qaw el-Qebir, clay
Petrie Museum, UC16163

Voices of Rashid

The head is in the form of a human being and

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there are signs of ancient Egyptian writing and it is called a sculpture.

Malak, 12 years old

Family memorials

Ancestor busts preserved the memory of the deceased. They were often set into household shrines and sometimes found near tombs. This depiction of the musician Muteminet may be from the tomb chapel of her son Amenmose, where a bust of her husband was also discovered.

1295–1186 BC, Thebes, limestone
British Museum, EA1198

An appeal to the living

To prevent the memory of the deceased from fading into oblivion, the living were urged to read inscribed prayers out loud to reactivate offerings. Texts were addressed to a specific audience,

such as priests, cemetery workers or scribes.

This stela, depicting Userwer and his family, was never finished. The reference grid and preliminary drawings are still visible.

1985–1795 BC, Egypt, limestone
British Museum, EA579

*O living ones who are on the earth who pass by
this tomb, as your deities love and favour you, may
you say:*

*'A thousand of bread and beer, a thousand of
cattle and birds, a thousand of alabaster and
clothes, a thousand of offerings and provisions
that go forth before Osiris.'*



*Kha ta heneket, kha ka-u apedju, kha shes
menekhet, kha hetep jefa, peret em bah Usir.*

Life in the necropolis

Mummified bodies were sometimes temporarily stored in tombs, awaiting their turn for burial. Inscribed wooden labels were attached to identify the corpse for both administrative and religious purposes. This mummy-label of lady Tatettriphis has an extract from the *Book of Traversing Eternity* in hieratic and demotic.

AD 100–200, Akhmim, wood
British Museum, EA23198

The afterlife industry

The job of mortuary workers did not end with burial. They also earned money by protecting tombs and charging patrons to maintain mortuary cults for deceased relatives. This demotic text settles a dispute between two parties who thought they had rights to manage the same burial. The oath admits an invalid claim, allowing the tomb to be reopened.

332 BC – AD 395, Egypt, pottery
British Museum, EA5679

The business of death

The rights to mummies and tombs and the income accrued from them were carefully defined in contracts. On 14 July 157 BC, the scribe Harekuisis wrote an agreement in demotic between two groups of mortuary priests concerning the provision of cloth to individuals performing different operations during the mummification ritual. These rolls of linen are similar to those discussed in the contract. The document ends with a penalty clause and a royal oath.

157 BC, Asyut, papyrus (top)
British Museum, EA10561

About 100 BC – AD 200, Egypt, linen and resin
British Museum, EA15039

[Subsection introduction to left, at end of display case]

Scribal knowledge

In ancient Egypt, being able to write was a key to success as only about 1% of the population were literate. Those who were unable to read or write employed scribes to draw up contracts, letters and wills. Not all scribes mastered hieroglyphs, as the script was typically reserved for formal and religious monuments. Instead, many learned hieratic and demotic, the cursive scripts used in everyday administration.

[Display case, labels left to right]

The god of writing

The patron god of writing, thinking and learning was Thoth, the moon deity. His name means 'the one of the ibis' and he could be depicted as an ibis or a man with an ibis head, possibly because the curve of the beak resembles the crescent moon. Sometimes, he was also depicted as a baboon holding up the moon. The Greeks associated him with Hermes, and eventually with Hermes Trismegistus, the legendary inventor of writing.

Egypt, black steatite (left)
British Museum, EA24655

664–525 BC, Egypt, glazed composition (centre)
British Museum, EA64606

747–30 BC, Egypt, bronze (right)
British Museum, EA64095

The lucky few

Education and apprenticeship in ancient Egypt were profession-oriented, aimed at training scribes and specialist craftspeople to work in local and national institutions such as the palace and temples. As highly respected members of society, it was every parent's wish to see their son become a scribe. Scribes often appear seated cross-legged with an unfolded papyrus on their lap.

2494–2345 BC, Egypt, limestone
Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités égyptiennes, N 43

Students of Egyptology who used the encyclopaedic grammar of Champollion to study the ancient Egyptian language would have learned hieroglyphs, hieratic, demotic and Coptic simultaneously.

*Dr Ola el-Aguizy
Emeritus Professor of Egyptology, University of Cairo*

Tools of the trade

Scribes were educated in schools where they probably learned hieratic first, replaced by demotic in later periods. They were taught to write by doing spelling and grammar exercises, recording passages dictated by the teacher, and copying parts of literary texts. Their daily tools included personalised palettes with black and red pigments, papyrus smoothers, inkwells, reed pens, knives and solid pigment cakes.

1. Palette

1795–1650 BC, Egypt, wood
British Museum, EA5516

2. Pigment container

747–332 BC, Egypt, glazed composition
British Museum, EA5539

3. Pigment

Egypt, Egyptian blue
British Museum, EA5570

4. Inkwell

664–525 BC, Egypt, steatite
British Museum, EA59852

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5. Smoother

1550–1295 BC, Egypt, stone
British Museum, EA66212

6. Inkwell

1 BC – AD 1, Tanis, glazed composition
British Museum, EA22015

7. Palette

1550–1295 BC, Egypt, schist
British Museum, EA12779

8. Knife

1550–1295 BC, Thebes, bronze
British Museum, EA65635

9. Pens

Egypt, reed
British Museum, EA27452, EA5535

Voices of Rashid

[Is it] a tray of cupcakes?

Hana, 12 years old

Practice makes perfect

Students practised writing on limestone flakes or pottery fragments called ostraca, as well as on wooden or stone tablets, and trial pieces. Training included basic spelling and grammar exercises and the copying of whole texts. These were either dictated or copied from examples. For easy reuse, tablets or writing boards were waxed and written upon with a stylus, or ink inscriptions were erased and overwritten.

1. About 1479–1425 BC, Egypt, wood and plaster
British Museum, EA5601

2. 600–700 AD, Egypt, wood
British Museum, EA29528

3. 664–525 BC, Memphis, quartzite
British Museum, EA69159

Personal marks

Ostraca were cheap and easily available, so they were a good medium on which to practise. One

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side of this ostrakon shows two different texts onto which a sketch was added later. The reverse records a list of the 'personal marks' of villagers, a kind of signature for people who could not write.

4. 1295–1069 BC, Deir el-Medina, limestone
British Museum, EA50716

[Picture caption] Ancient 'signatures' are visible on the reverse of the displayed ostrakon.

© Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

Preserving writing

The scribal profession involved more than just writing. Scribes preserved the memory of Egypt by copying, reinterpreting and reworking revered pieces of literature.

The *Teaching of Khety* was produced around 2000 BC but mostly preserved through later copies like these. The work is also known as *Satire of the Trades* because Khety mocks all other

professions in favour of the scribal one in order to convince his son to become a scribe: 'There's nothing that surpasses writings!'

1504–1492 BC, Egypt, limestone
British Museum, EA41650, EA47896, EA29550, EA65943, EA6559

1295–1069 BC, Egypt, papyrus (above)
British Museum, EA10182,3–11, EA10222,1-4, EA10699,5

I see the coppersmith at his toil at the mouth of his furnace, his fingers like crocodile skin, his stench worse than fish eggs...

The field labourer complains eternally, his voice rises higher than the birds, with his fingers turned into sores from carrying overloads of produce...

The mat-weaver lives inside the weaving-house, he is worse off than a woman...

Quotes from the *Teaching of Khety*

[Subsection introduction at end of display case behind]

Family and society

Cracking jokes and writing love poetry may not be the first things that come to mind when imagining ancient Egyptian life. But thanks to decipherment, we know that just like us, ancient Egyptians sent letters, got married and divorced, and negotiated business deals. The earthly nature of much ancient writing may surprise some, as expressions of passion, politics and personal beliefs have often been overshadowed by religious prayers and monumental propaganda.

[Labels for wall cases on right, left to right]

Crime in antiquity

No formal Egyptian code of law has been preserved, but legal writings reveal penalties for theft of private property. One famous case concerned the theft of copper fittings from a chest of Ramessesnakht, High Priest of Amun. The porter and witness, Ahautinufer, revealed the culprits who were also known from another case.

1099–1069 BC, Egypt, papyrus (top)
British Museum, EA10403

Money troubles

People often erected boundary stones to mark their properties. This stela is inscribed with the words *Pr-Snt*, the 'estate of Senet'.

Land could be mortgaged, as we learn from the papyrus above that describes a loan the herdsman

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Harsiesis was unable to repay. The moneylender Panas kept it in his extensive archive as proof of his entitlement to the land that had been forfeited by Harsiesis. Panas belonged to a well-known family of mortuary priests.

2055–1650 BC, Egypt, limestone
British Museum, EA59205

162 BC, Thebes, papyrus
British Museum, EA10823

Tale of the Eloquent Peasant

In this story, the peasant Khunanup is tricked and swindled by a greedy landowner. His case is brought before the high steward who is so intrigued by the peasant's gift for words that he forces him to endlessly repeat his elegant speeches so they can be recorded and presented to the king. After much suffering, Khunanup is finally granted justice.

1985–1795 BC, Thebes, papyrus
British Museum, EA10274

Khunanup speaks

‘You are the equal of Thoth, one who judges without being partial.’ In this scene, the eloquent peasant flatters, admonishes and pleads with the high steward to act and restore justice after he has been robbed of his possessions.

Duration: 1 minute 25 seconds

‘A peasant good of speech’

Scan the code to read *The Eloquent Peasant* and to find out about the British Museum’s related community work in Asyut, Middle Egypt. The project resulted in a series of films and a children’s book exploring local mythology, all of which are free to download.



britishmuseum.org/eloquent-peasant

[Display case behind, labels left to right]

Weights and measures

Different units were needed for measuring volume, especially grain or flour, as these were the standard currency for salaries. Small weights used *deben* as the basic unit, here marked with '60' (948g), '6' (95g) and the third with 'Sahura, beloved of the gods, unit 35' (554g).

Over 3,000 years ago in Deir al-Medina, Amenemope paid between 12 and 25 *deben* for his bed to the carpenter Meryre, as this inscription shows. This equalled between 6 and 12.5 sacks of grain.

1295–1186 BC, Deir el-Medina, ceramic (left)
British Museum, EA5644

2055–1650 BC, Gebelein, sandstone (centre two)
British Museum, EA15775, EA23067

2494–2345 BC, Egypt, steatite (right)
British Museum, EA65836

Building and measuring

Through this measuring rod, Champollion discovered that the Egyptians used units of measurement inspired by the human body. The basic unit was the cubit, or the length from the elbow to the tip of the middle finger (about 45 cm). The cubit was subdivided into seven palms (7.5 cm) and further separated into four fingers (1.875 cm). Heights in cubits are mentioned in this letter from Mentuhotep to Ahmose about the construction of a house.

1550–1295 BC, Thebes, papyrus (back wall)
British Museum, EA10102

1319–1292 BC, Saqqara, wood
Torino, Museo Egizio, Cat. 6347

Voices of Rashid

This is [like] the ruler we use at school.

Farah, 12 years old

Textbook maths

The Rhind Mathematical Papyrus is an ancient textbook with 88 mathematical problems. Each starts with a 'method of calculating', written in red, with the steps and solution following in black. It includes fractions, division and multiplication tables, and the calculation of volumes and areas. The top roll focuses on arithmetic and algebra while the longer one below it explores geometry.

About 1550 BC, Thebes, papyrus (top)
British Museum, EA10057-58

[Labels left to right]

The interpretation of dreams

Ancient Egyptians believed that dreams could reveal the future. This dream book belonging to Qenherkhepshef explained whether a dream was a good or bad omen:

‘If a man sees himself in a dream looking after monkeys: bad – a change awaits him.’

On the back, a poem about the Battle of Qadesh and a letter to the vizier written in Qenherkhepshef’s bold handwriting are also visible.

About 1220 BC, Deir el-Medina, papyrus
British Museum, EA10683,3

Medicine and magic

Since many illnesses were thought to be caused by evil demons, medical practice was combined with magic as an effective method of treatment. The London Medical Papyrus contains a broad range of charms and recipes against skin complaints, burns, eye diseases and miscarriages. Spell 7 gives a remedy for a skin disease using red ochre, Lower Egyptian salt in linen, fruits, and the froth of sweet beer.

1550–1295 BC, Egypt, papyrus (bottom)

Rediscovering ancient Egypt

British Museum, EA10059,1

AD 1–800, Egypt, salt-infused linen

British Museum, EA53927

Egypt, ochre pigment sample

British Museum, EA91061

1550–1069 BC, Egypt, organics in ceramic bowl

British Museum, EA37254, EA5369

Practical fashion

Over 90 different recipes are known for the treatment of eye problems. Black and green kohl powder had antibacterial properties and could be carried around in pots to be applied as eyeliner. Preventative and cosmetic uses were not always distinguishable from each other.

2055–1650 BC, Egypt, hematite and gold

British Museum, EA32151

Divine protection

Some incantations and hymns focused on warding

away dangerous animals such as lions, crocodiles and snakes. Although these animals were feared, they were also bestowed with positive qualities and worshipped as gods. The scorpion goddess Serqet, or Selkis, became the patroness for curing venomous bites and stings.

Statues of legendary saints also protected people from harm. Imhotep, the architect of King Djoser's step pyramid, was known as a healer and worshipped as a god of medicine even two thousand years after his death.

747–332 BC, Egypt, green basalt (right)
British Museum, EA57365

747–332 BC, Egypt, bronze (left)
British Museum, EA64495

[Other side of display case, labels left to right]

For the love of a child

The portrayal of the goddess Isis breastfeeding

Rediscovering ancient Egypt

her son Horus was later adapted by Christians for the Virgin and child. The left-hand statue was commissioned by Panebu, a teacher to the king. Children were often shown naked, suckling on their index fingers and wearing a side lock.

This typical depiction of 'Horus the child' was adopted and exported across the Mediterranean world as 'Harpocrates' by the Greeks, as demonstrated by the statue on the right. The base is inscribed in hieroglyphs and Phoenician, an extinct alphabetic language.

About 664–525 BC, Egypt, feldspar, breccia (left)
British Museum, EA23050

600–300 BC, Egypt, bronze (right)
British Museum, 132908

Caring for parents

The most fundamental duty of the eldest child was to care for their parents. In the letter above, Butehamen writes to troop commander Shedsuhor

expressing concerns about his father Tjaroy who is about to go on a journey to Nubia: 'Look after (him) with vigilance in the evening as well, while he is in your hands.'

1072 BC, Thebes, papyrus (top)
British Museum, EA10284

A tale of treachery

A pleasant lifestyle is disrupted when the wife of Anubis tries to seduce her brother-in-law, Bata. Humiliated by his refusal, she claims that Bata attacked her. Anubis initially turns against his brother but later discovers his wife's betrayal and kills her. Inena's *Tale of the Two Brothers* is one of the most famous ancient Egyptian literary compositions.

About 1215 BC, Memphis, papyrus
British Museum, EA10183,6

Marriage and divorce

This text reports the separation of Hessunebef from his wife Hener and states that he supported her for three years after the divorce. The reason for separation is not mentioned, but could have been initiated by either party. Hener would probably have kept the possessions she brought into the marriage, along with a partial claim to properties acquired with her former husband.

1186–1069 BC, Thebes, limestone
Petrie Museum, UC 19614

‘We shall keep her safe’

Protective spells could be recited or written on long papyrus strips, rolled up, and placed inside necklaces. This spell was for the wellbeing of a little girl named Buiharkhons. The hieratic text is composed of a series of sentences starting with ‘We shall keep her safe from...’, for example, ‘We shall keep her safe from leprosy, from

blindness, and from the wedjat-eye.'

Accompanying amulets in the form of the threat, in this case the wedjat-eye (also known as the Eye of Horus), reinforced the spell's power.

About 900 BC, Thebes, papyrus
British Museum, EA10083

Egypt, steatite
British Museum, EA8069

Divine protection

As family was so important for Egyptians, it was essential to protect one's relatives from evil. Several gods and goddesses appeared on amulets to safeguard the family. Taweret, a hippopotamus with large breasts, was the goddess of childbirth. Bes, a bandy-legged dwarf with a lion's mane and protruding tongue, protected mothers and children. Heket was a goddess of fertility, represented by a frog.

Egypt, glazed composition (left and centre)
British Museum, EA11853, EA61218

Rediscovering ancient Egypt

1550–747 BC, Egypt, diorite or gneiss (right)
British Museum, EA14758

Voices of Rashid

It's interesting his name is 'Bes', a common word we use in the informal Egyptian dialect with several meanings like 'but' and 'that's it!'

Asmaa, 12 years old

The sound of love

Prayers to Hathor, the goddess of love and music, were often accompanied by the sistrum, a musical instrument used in dances and religious ceremonies. When shaken, the sistrum could produce a soft clink or a loud jangle. Its power to appease the anger of gods was an attractive quality for Egyptians.

747–332 BC, Egypt, bronze
British Museum, EA36310

Expressions of love

Love poems provide intimate glimpses into everyday life as they are surprisingly direct about love and romance. The poems were probably sung, and used interactions with the natural world – growing fruit, capturing birds, swimming in the Nile – as metaphors to express affection and desire. For instance, sweet pomegranate wine is said to taste bitter when lovesick. The cosmetic spoon in the form of a naked girl swimming with a duck also recalls the poetry's natural imagery.

1550–1295 BC, Egypt, papyrus
British Museum, EA10060

1550–1295 BC, Egypt, glazed composition
British Museum, EA59398

Egypt, organic
British Museum, EA91062

1550–1069 BC, Egypt, wood
British Museum, EA38186

Music and poetry



In this ancient love poem, translated from the papyrus before you, the speaker describes how sweet things such as pomegranate wine seem bitter without her lover. She mentions Amun, the king of gods, before a sistrum rattles.

Duration: 35 seconds

Naughty drawings

Erotic depictions were uncommon in formal settings, although nakedness was abundant in Egyptian art. The rough etchings on this stone flake reveal a cheeky ancient doodle. A caption reads 'gentle is the charm of my skin'. The use of hieroglyphic script suggests it mocks more formal paintings.

1295–1069 BC, Deir el-Medina, limestone
British Museum, EA50714

A human obsession

Erotic figures sometimes had humorous aspects, such as this man with an enormous phallus wrapped over his head. It may have been worn as an amulet to ensure potency, or perhaps to ward off evil.

400–50 BC, Egypt, glazed composition
British Museum, EA90380

[Section introduction through entrance to last room]

Writing for eternity

Despite their aspirations for immortality, ancient Egyptians could never be certain that their writings would survive. But survive they did on stone, papyrus, ceramic, and metal, waiting to be decoded. The decipherment of hieroglyphs in 1822 is now considered the most important event in the history of Egyptology, unlocking three thousand years of history, language, literature, religion, art and architecture. Most importantly, it has allowed us to find the similarities, and the differences, between ancient Egyptians and ourselves.

[Labels left to right]

A message from the past

The Shabaka Stone records a myth in which the god Ptah created the world by reading aloud the names of gods, people, cities and temples. The text claims to be a copy of an ancient worm-eaten papyrus which the pharaoh ordered to be carved on stone to preserve it for eternity. Although it was nearly erased by later re-use, ultimately the pharaoh succeeded in his task, as we can enjoy the text today, 2732 years later.

710 BC, Memphis, conglomerate stone
British Museum, EA498

Experience the story of creation

This writing – his majesty copied it so that it became better than it had been before, in order that his name may endure and his monument last throughout eternity, a work done by the Son of Ra,

Writing for eternity

Shabaka.

Listen to the story of Ptah creating the world in different languages: ancient Egyptian, Arabic, English, French, German, Greek, Hindi, Italian, Japanese, Mandarin, Spanish and Swahili.

Duration: 1 minute 30 seconds

As an Arabic-speaking Egyptian Egyptologist, cultural continuity in Egypt has always fascinated me because I constantly see the impact of ancient Egyptian culture on our daily life, despite the changes in language, religion and circumstance that the country has undergone during its very long history.

Dr Fayza Haikal

Emerita Professor of Egyptology, American University of Cairo

Find out more

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Learn more about Egyptian hieroglyphs and the race to decipher them in a programme of events including talks and lectures from leading experts. Visit britishmuseum.org/hieroglyphs for details.

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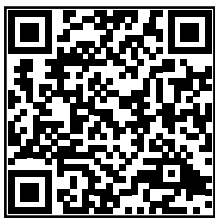
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