

CLAY TABLETS AND POTTERY FROM ABYDOS. SATIRE OF THE TRADES. INSCRIPTION FROM WADI HAMMAT, AND THE ROSETTA STONE

## THANK YOU, ROSETTA STONE HIEROGLYPHS

Humans are fascinated by firsts. Who was the first to step on the moon, the first to cross the sea—the first to write? Until recently, scientists thought the earliest writers were the Sumerians in Mesopotamia (which today is Iraq). But 300 pieces of pots no bigger than postage stamps are suggesting that writing began just as early in Egypt.



Clay tablets from Abydos, about 3100 BCE

Pottery from King Scorpion's possible tomb, Abydos, about 3100 BCE



Scientists have been digging for decades in Abydos, an ancient royal cemetery west of the Nile, 300 miles south of Cairo. The ancient Egyptians buried their first kings in Abydos because they believed the mouth to the canyon there was the entrance to the next world. In a tomb that could be King

Scorpion's, scientists are finding hundreds of pieces of pottery with some of the earliest writings in the world.

What words inspired some ancient Egyptian to invent writing? Were the words poetic? Were they wise? Did they reveal the true meaning of life? Did they point the way to the nearest watering hole? Nothing quite so meaningful—the inscriptions on the clay jars and vases are records of oil and linen deliveries. There was no money 5,300 years ago. Taxes were paid in goods. Sometimes they were paid with oil and linen. These very early written words were tax records. There is a saying that nothing in life is certain—except death and taxes. Maybe it's fitting that some of the earliest writings are tax records found in a cemetery.

We take writing for granted. In those first school years we carefully learn to draw the letters. We recite the sound each letter makes. But suppose no one had written before us, no teacher to show us what a letter looks like, no sound to go with it. How would you begin to write? The Egyptians began with pictures.

At first the pictures stood for the real thing. A picture of the sun meant “the sun.” As you can imagine, being able to write about only objects is limiting. How would you write the word “hot”? There is no object named “hot.” So the pictures began to stand for ideas related to the object. A picture of the sun might mean light, or day, or—hot. It wasn't long before this was limiting, too. How would you write the word “belief”? What object could you draw that is related to the word belief? But if the objects could also represent a *sound*, then you could write “belief” as a picture of a bee followed by the picture of a leaf and the reader would be able to figure it out. (This example is an English word. The word for belief in Egyptian would be different, of course.)

It wasn't long before there were hundreds of symbols. Reading them was as complicated as writing them because Egyptian writers, called scribes, sometimes wrote right to left, sometimes left to right, and sometimes top to bottom (but never bottom to top). The only clue to which direction



MEANWHILE  
IN PAKISTAN...

In 1999, archaeologists on a dig in Harappa, Pakistan, found markings on pottery from 5,000 years ago. These plant-shaped symbols may be as old as the earliest examples of writing found in Egypt and Mesopotamia.



Some hieroglyphs stand for names, such as the name of Senwosret I repeated inside the ovals in this inscription. His name means “the Ka of Re comes into being.” Other hieroglyphs stand for sounds. The squiggly line is a picture of rippling water and stands for the sound of the letter n.

SOME THINGS  
WE'LL NEVER KNOW

You may notice that scholars spell ancient Egyptian names different ways. The sun god is sometimes spelled Ra, sometimes Re. Because hieroglyphs have no vowels we will never know for sure how the ancients pronounced things.

hieros + glyphe =  
"sacred" + "carving"  
The Greeks called the  
Egyptian writing symbols  
hieroglyphs because they  
saw them carved into the  
walls of temples and other  
sacred places.

you should be reading the inscription was the way the animals and people faced. You read toward the faces.

There was no punctuation. There were no periods or question marks so that the reader would know where one sentence ended and the next began. Not even a space between words helped to make the meaning clear. And if that doesn't complicate things enough, the fact that vowels were not used does. Imagine not being able to write a vowel, or should we write mgnntbnllwdtwrtwvl, or worse yet, lwtvtrtdwllgnbtngm?

To the ancient Egyptians the written word was more than just a few scratches in clay. To them, once written, words had an eternal life—a voice. They could even be dangerous. For protection the picture of a crocodile was often drawn with a spear through it, or the snake drawn with its head chopped off. Imagine being afraid to write the word "beast" because you believed it could come to life and get you—talk about nightmares!

Egyptians called their writing *medu neter*, which means "words of god." Thousands of years later the Greeks named these writings **hieroglyphs**, which means "sacred carvings," because they found them covering temples and tombs.

Very few people in ancient Egypt could read and write, perhaps only 1 percent of the population. Imagine being one of the few who possessed the power to give a word life. Imagine being the keeper of the "words of god." The scribes shared this mysterious skill with rulers and gods.

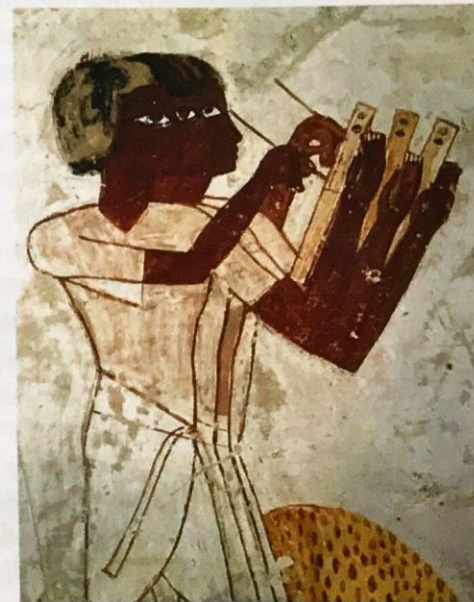
Learning hieroglyphs wasn't easy. There were more than 700 signs to memorize. It took students years to master them. While other children were outside playing, the stu-

dents studying to be scribes spent their days bent over pieces of pottery, drawing and re-drawing the hieroglyphs. Students erased their work with a wet rag and started again until they had pleased their teachers.

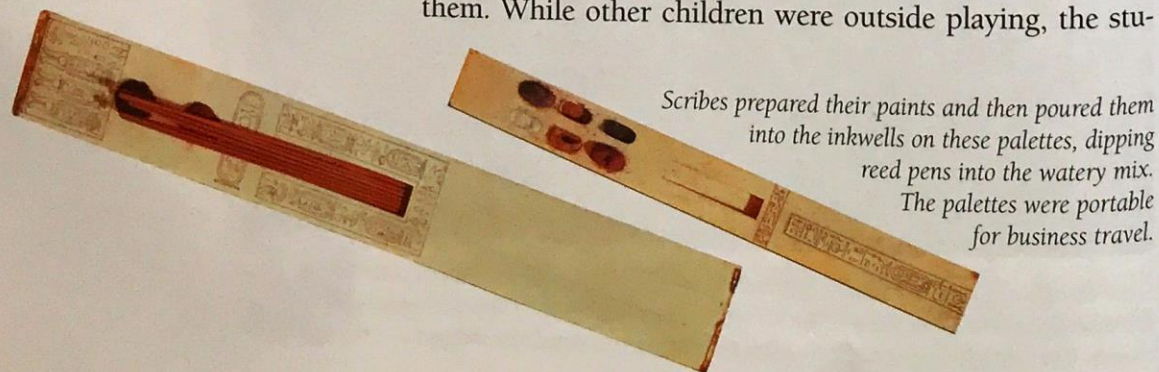
If the students' minds began to wander, the teacher would remind them with words like these in the *Satire of the Trades*, "I would have you love writing more than your mother and have you recognize its beauty." If the students continued to misbehave, the teacher might warn them about other professions like the "coppersmith at his toil at the mouth of his furnace his fingers like crocodile skin his stench worse than fish eggs." Or the gardener who carried a pole across his shoulders "and there is a great blister on his neck, oozing puss." Maybe then, practicing hieroglyphs wouldn't seem so bad. The students might even agree with the teacher that "it is greater than any profession, there is none like it on earth."

Once the scribes' schooling was done it was time to become an apprentice and to learn even more about the craft by serving a working scribe. We know from an inscription on a statue that a scribe named Bekenkhons spent 11 years as an apprentice in the royal stables after going to school for 4 years at the temple of Mut at Karnak. There were plenty of job opportunities for scribes. Everything from personal letters to military secrets to magic spells was written by the scribes. Scribes calculated how many bricks it would take to build a wall, and how many loaves of bread it would take to feed the bricklayers. Scribes wrote out healing directions for doctors. They recorded births and deaths. Anything anyone wanted or needed written down required a scribe.

64 *Satire of the Trades or Instruction*, about 1991–1782 BCE



Scribes record the year's harvest with their reed pens. Ancient Egyptians were careful record keepers, but in triplicate?



Scribes prepared their paints and then poured them into the inkwells on these palettes, dipping reed pens into the watery mix. The palettes were portable for business travel.

Over time, the slow-to-write hieroglyphs were replaced by an easier system of writing. Scribes still used the sacred way of writing on temples and tombs, but for everyday writing they used a shorthand they called *shesh*, which means “writing for documents.” Later, the Greeks named this writing hieretic.

Documents were often written on paper made from the papyrus plant. Papyrus makers would peel the skin off the triangular stem of the papyrus reed, then slice the stem into thin strips. They laid the strips next to each other overlapping slightly, then arranged another layer on top going in the opposite direction. After covering the reed strips with linen, they pounded the sheet with a mallet. The crushed reeds oozed sticky papyrus sap. When dry, the sap glued the strips together. The sheets were most often used like the pages of a book, but if the scribes wanted long rolls, they glued the ends of the sheets of paper together with flour and water paste. Scribes wrote on the papyrus sheets with pens that looked like paintbrushes. They dipped their brushes in water, then rubbed the brush on a cake just as you mix watercolors. Black cakes were charcoal often made from the soot on cooking pots. Red cakes came from the red earth of the desert.

Hieroglyphs are everywhere in Egypt. There are even markings like ancient graffiti on the stones along travel routes. Some are very old like this inscription written nearly 4,000 years ago at a quarry in the mountainous desert: “I was commander of the troops . . . in this highland, equipped with water skins, baskets, . . . and every fresh vegetable of the South. I made its valleys green, and its heights pools of water; settled with children throughout. . . .” And some are more recent, like the “thank-you note” that a group of priests wrote in 196 BCE to their 13-year-old Pharaoh Ptolemy V for making it a law that their temple receive money. They carved the law and their appreciation on polished black stone. They wrote the thank you note three ways—in hieroglyphs, demotic, and Greek.

For more than 3,000 years, the sons and the occasional daughter of the rich and the royal studied to become

66 Inscription, Wadi Hammamat, about 1930 BCE

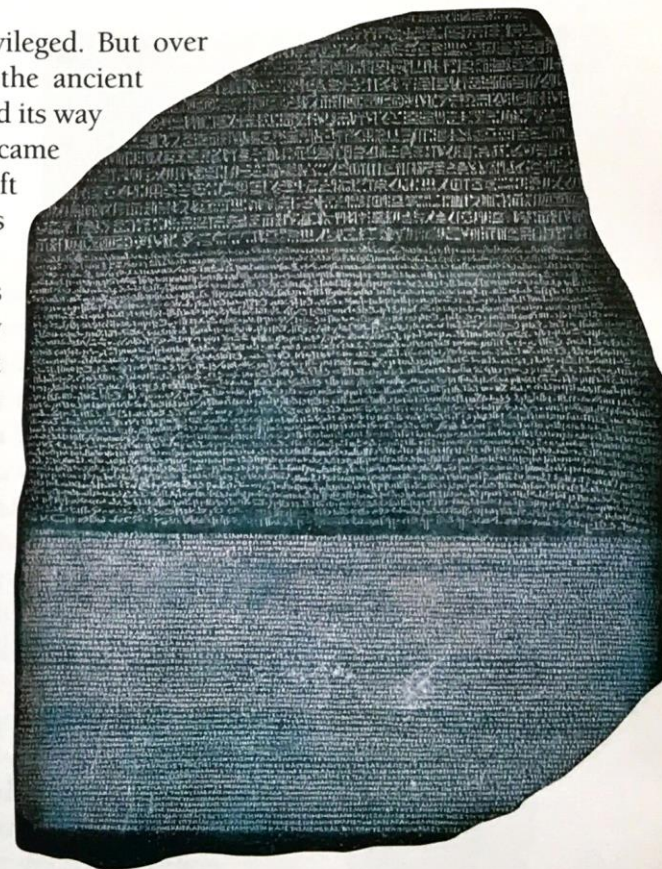
scribes. It was a profession for the privileged. But over time, fewer and fewer scribes learned the ancient sacred symbols. The Greek alphabet found its way into Egyptian writing and even vowels became visible. Eventually, there was no one left who knew how to read those first words drawn in pictures.

In modern times, the curious drawings taunted scholars. The mysterious history of ancient Egypt was right there in front of them. If only someone could read it. The carvings circling temple columns, the paintings coloring coffins, the words written on tomb walls waited in silence for someone to crack the code. Who would be first to figure out what the ancients had written?

In 1799 the French army was in Egypt as part of Napoleon’s grand plan to conquer the world. His engineers were rebuilding an old fort along the branch of the Nile called the Rosetta. The men had torn away one wall and were clearing the rubble when they found a gleaming black stone carved in three different scripts. Even though the engineers could not read the words, they knew the stone must be important. Napoleon sent artists to make copies of the text carved in the stone and the copies were sent to scholars all over Europe.

The slab of black stone that the priests had carved the thank-you note into 2,000 years before became known as the Rosetta Stone. Scholars translated the Greek right away, but no one could read demotic or hieroglyphs. How did those curious carvings work?

The first real breakthrough came from an Englishman named Thomas Young. By the time Young was 2, he was reading. By the time he was 7, he was fluent in 3 languages. By the time he was 14, he was fluent in 12 languages. Young was sure he would be the first to crack the code. He discovered



66 The Rosetta Stone, about 196 BCE

*The Rosetta Stone contains one of the first “presidential” pardons. Part of the text says, “those who were in prison and those who were under accusation for a long time, [King Ptolemy] has freed of the charges against them.”*



Ancient Egyptians drew an oval called a cartouche around the names of kings, queens, and high-ranking officials. The cartouche magically protected the name on monuments.

that the hieroglyphs for the 13-year-old Pharaoh Ptolemy's name were repeated six times inside little ovals that the French called *cartouches*, because they looked like the paper rolls, or cartouches, that the French stored their gunpowder in for their muskets. Young worked on the demotic lines and was able to figure out many words, but the hieroglyphs stumped him. It took another young genius, building on Young's work—a man named Jean François Champollion—to finally translate the entire Rosetta Stone.

A simple thank-you note written by grateful priests turned out to be the key that opened the Egyptian past for modern scholars. No longer would scholars have to settle for the Greek, Roman, or Hebrew version of Egypt's history. Egypt's own stories could now come to life. Maybe there is magic in the written word after all. To be on the safe side, let's *not* write the word for that hairy, scary thing that rhymes with "feast."

*"Happy is the heart of him who writes. . . . Be a scribe! Your body will be sleek, your hand will be soft. You will not be like a hired ox. You are one who sits grandly in your house: your servants answer speedily."*

—Papyrus Lansing, a schoolbook by the royal scribe Nebmare-nakht, who lived between 1185 and 1070 BCE