

Hieroglyphics



Figure 1: Hieroglyphics can be seen on a temple wall at Karnak in what was the ancient city of Thebes in Egypt.

Examples of Sumerian and Egyptian writing

Sumerian cuneiform sign	Meaning	Egyptian hieroglyph
	ox	
	sun	
	to go	
	water	

Figure 2: Cuneiform is the oldest known system of writing. It has been traced back nearly 5,000 years to the Sumerian people.



Figure 3: Hieroglyphs in the oval represent the name of Queen Hatshepsut.

Hieroglyphics is a writing system that uses pictures and symbols instead of letters and words. It is most often associated with the ancient Egyptians. However, other groups, including the Maya, used similar writing systems.

Each symbol in hieroglyphic writing is called a hieroglyph. The word hieroglyph means “holy carving.” The Egyptians used hieroglyphs on their temple walls and public monuments. They carved them in stone but also painted them on wood and other smooth surfaces.

Hieroglyphs were used in several ways. Some represented the objects that they depict. For example, the word sun would be represented by a large circle with a smaller circle in its center. Other hieroglyphs represented ideas that were associated with the picture. The sign for “sun” might serve as the sign for “day.” Hieroglyphs could also stand for particular sounds or groups of sounds.

Hieroglyphics developed thousands of years ago. By 2900 B.C., the Egyptians were using hieroglyphic writing. It remained in use for more than 3,000 years. During the ad 100s and 200s, many Egyptians became Christians. Egyptian Christians used the Greek alphabet. Slowly, people stopped using hieroglyphics. Eventually, no one could read hieroglyphic writing anymore.

In 1822 a French scholar rediscovered the meaning of hieroglyphics. He did it by studying the Rosetta Stone. Soldiers had found the stone in 1799. The message on it was written in both hieroglyphics and Greek. The scholar could read Greek, so he could figure out what the hieroglyphs on the stone meant.

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