

## Hieroglyphics

hieroglyphic				hieratic			demotic
2700–2600 BC	2500–2400 BC	c.1500 BC	500–100 BC	c. 1900 BC	c. 1300 BC	c. 200 BC	400–100 BC

Figure 1: The hieroglyphics and their hieratic and demotic equivalents give evidence of having evolved over several centuries.

Ancient Egyptians had three different writing systems. The oldest, best known, and most difficult to read is called hieroglyphics. The word, which means “sacred carving,” was used by Greeks who saw the script on temple walls and public monuments. The Greeks were somewhat mistaken in their terminology because hieroglyphs were used on gravestones, statues, coffins, vessels, implements, and for all sorts of nonreligious texts—songs, legal documents, and historical inscriptions.

Hieroglyphic writing has two main characteristics: objects are portrayed as ideograms or pictures, and the picture signs have the phonetic, or sound, value of the words represented by the objects. Thus, hieroglyphs are not pictures only: they can be spoken, as are words written in an alphabet such as that of English. A written text normally contains three kinds of hieroglyphs: ideograms, which are read as the words they represent; phonograms, which are signs that do not refer to the objects they picture: they simply stand for one or more consonants; and determinatives, which have no phonetic value but help the reader to determine the correct meaning of the text.

Hieroglyphics were established as a writing system by at least 3100 B.C. The system remained in use for about 3,500 years. The last known hieroglyphic inscription is dated ad 394. In the earliest period there were about 700 hieroglyphs. In this first stage of writing only the absolutely necessary symbols were invented. In the second stage of development easier readability was achieved by increasing the number of signs and by using determinatives. After the second stage, a period of about 2,000 years during which the system was essentially unaltered, the number of symbols increased to several thousand.

The other two Egyptian writing systems are hieratic and demotic. These are cursive scripts. Like modern handwriting, they are flowing, and the letters of words are joined. Hieratic (from the Greek *hieratikos*, meaning “priestly”) got its name at a time when it was used only for religious texts. Everyday documents, especially

government texts, were written in demotic (from the Greek word *dēmotikos*, meaning “for the people”).

Both of these writing forms are based on hieroglyphics. Hieratic script was, like hieroglyphics, in use from about 3100 B.C. It was originally written in vertical columns and later in horizontal rows from right to left. After 660 B.C. demotic script replaced hieratic in most ordinary writing, but hieratic remained in use by priests for several more centuries.

Hieroglyphics were not deciphered until the early 19th century. This was made possible by the discovery of the Rosetta Stone in 1799 by members of Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt. This basalt stone, now in the British Museum, contains identical texts in hieroglyphics, demotic, and Greek. A French linguist and historian, Jean-François Champollion, succeeded in translating the Rosetta Stone in 1822.

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