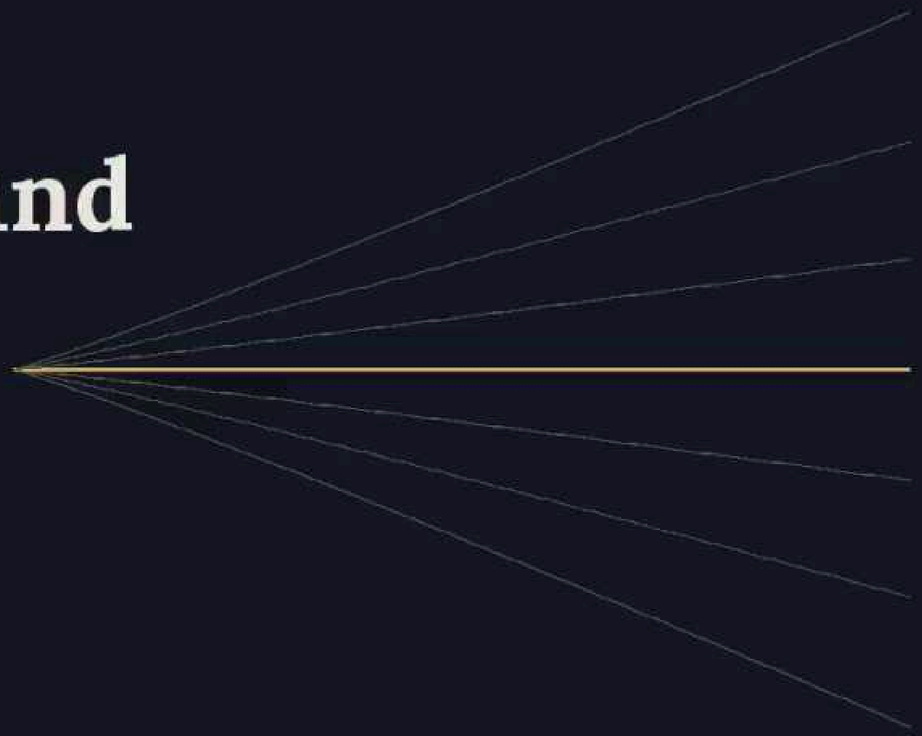
ANDERSON ACADEMY

EGYP 101 B · Introduction to Egyptian Hieroglyphs Middle Egyptian (Brief course)

Lecture 1 · about 7 min

The Language, Its Scripts, and Its Decipherment



A library of university-level courses

Questions or feedback: garyanderson@mail.grokbot.com · @garyanderson

Three questions

- What kind of language?
- How was it written?
- How was it deciphered?

¶ 1.1

And how was a script that no one could read for almost fifteen centuries finally deciphered?

The Afroasiatic family

- Egyptian
- Semitic: Hebrew, Arabic
- Berber
- Cushitic: Somali
- Chadic: Hausa

¶ 1.2

Like its Semitic cousins, Egyptian builds most words on roots of consonants,

Five stages

- **About 2600 BC** Old Egyptian
- **About 2000 BC** Middle Egyptian
- **About 1300 BC** Late Egyptian
- **About 650 BC** Demotic
- **About AD 300** Coptic

¶ 1.3

Late Egyptian was the everyday language of the New Kingdom from about 1300 BC.

Speech and writing

Spoken language

- Kept changing
- Became Late Egyptian

Written language

- Stayed conservative
- Kept Middle Egyptian for monuments

¶ 1.4

Priests and scribes of the New Kingdom and even of Greek and Roman times still composed hymns and monumental

Hieroglyphs

- Greek: sacred carvings
- Egyptian: words of the god
- Carved and painted on monuments
- Used for religious books

¶ 1.5

Hieroglyphs were carved in stone, painted on walls and coffins, and sometimes written with care on papyrus, especially in religious books.

Two forms of one script

Hieroglyphs

- Pictorial
- For monuments

Hieratic

- Cursive
- For daily writing

¶ 1.6

Letters, accounts, legal documents, and most literature were written in hieratic.

Scribes

- A small literate elite
- Years of training
- Copying model texts
- Writing led to office and status

¶ 1.7

copying model texts such as the Satire of the Trades, which praised the scribe's profession above all others.

Later scripts

Demotic: very cursive, from about 650 BC

▼

Coptic: Greek letters plus Demotic extras

▼

Coptic writes the vowels

¶ 1.8

Finally, Egyptian Christians wrote the language in the Greek alphabet with a few extra letters taken from Demotic.

Origins

- Labels from Abydos, about 3200 BC
- Signs for sounds from the start
- Mature by the Old Kingdom
- Principles stable for millennia

¶ 1.9

The script was fully developed by the Old Kingdom, and its basic principles hardly changed for three thousand years,

Writing materials

- Papyrus from pressed reed strips
- Palette with black and red ink
- Red for headings
- Origin of the word rubric

¶ 1.10

Red ink marked headings and new sections, a practice we still recall in the word rubric,

The script fades

AD 394	last hieroglyphic inscription at Philae
AD 452	last Demotic graffito
Later centuries	Coptic speech declines
Today	Coptic in liturgy only

¶ 1.11

and the last Demotic graffito there dates to AD 452.

Early attempts

Theories

- Horapollo: signs as symbols
- Kircher: mystical readings

Verdict

- Wrong about how signs work
- Kircher right about Coptic

¶ 1.12

The learned Jesuit Athanasius Kircher, in the seventeenth century, built elaborate mystical readings on this view.

The Rosetta Stone

- Found in 1799 near Rashid
- Decree of 196 BC for Ptolemy V
- Hieroglyphic, Demotic, and Greek
- Now in the British Museum

¶ 1.13

The decree, of 196 BC, honoured the young king Ptolemy the Fifth.

After the discovery

- British Museum since 1802
- Copies spread across Europe
- Hieroglyphic section broken
- Twenty years of work followed

¶ 1.14

The hieroglyphic part is badly broken, and it took more than twenty years of work, and many other inscriptions,

Decipherment

- Young: cartouches hold royal names
- Champollion compares Ptolemy and Cleopatra
- Signs for sounds identified
- Native names such as Ramesses read

¶ 1.15

Comparing the cartouches of Ptolemy and of Cleopatra, he found the signs for p, t, o, l, and others,

Champollion's breakthrough

- Letter to Dacier, 1822
- Script mixes sounds and meanings
- Coptic as the key to vocabulary
- Founder of Egyptology

¶ 1.16

By his early death in 1832 he could read and translate whole texts.

Why start here

- The classical stage
- Standard textbooks teach it
- Sinuhe and Ptahhotep
- Next: how the script works

¶ 1.17

In the next lecture we open the script itself and learn how its signs work,