



# Guide to the Writing Systems of Ancient Egypt

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# 5. Ptolemaic Writing

CHRISTOPHE THIERS

*All that is illegible in Egypt is not necessarily “Ptolemaic”*  
(S. Sauneron)

The term “Ptolemaic” has conventionally been applied to a hieroglyphic writing system that was used in the final centuries of ancient Egypt (3rd century BC–3rd century AD) under the Ptolemies and their successors (though the date when it appeared is not specified). The designation derives from the fact that the Ptolemaic and Roman temples of Upper Egypt are covered with an incomparable corpus of hieroglyphic inscriptions (Fig. 24). At the time this script was current, it was used to transcribe a dead language,

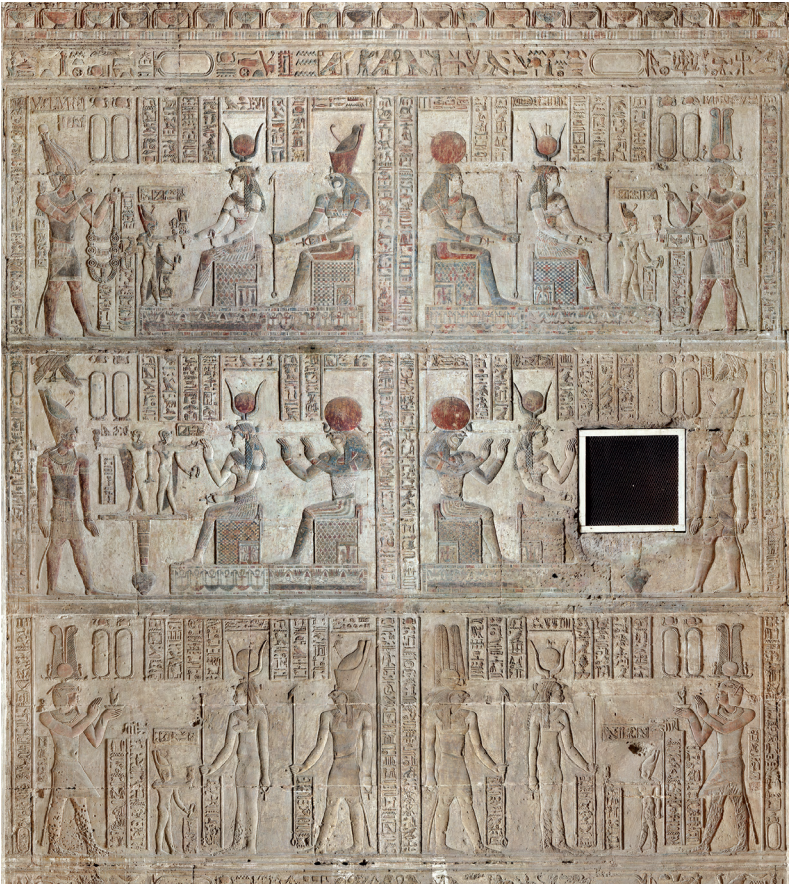


Fig. 24. Dendera, Chapel of the Sistrum, east wall. © IFAO, nu\_2018\_01310/G. Pollin.



Fig. 25. Esna, hypostyle hall, column 1 (after Esna III, no. 196). © A. Amin.




a “traditional Egyptian” based on a reference model of old and middle Egyptian. Depending on the type of religious composition, this traditional Egyptian could include both past and contemporary vernacular linguistic constructs of late Egyptian and Demotic. The Ptolemaic script was a scholarly script that only priests and the more erudite were capable of handling, and it is found on other media (stelae, statues, papyri, etc.) that were produced by and for the same members of the sacerdotal elite. Despite the generic designation, “Ptolemaic” is not uniform. It reflects different degrees of linguistic complexity, from common usage to constructions attesting to intellectual depth. The types of texts, their origins, and especially their date of composition stand as evidence of notable evolution and disparities.

The most obvious characteristic of “Ptolemaic”, and that which led it to be considered a “secret” or “cryptographic” form of writing for a long time (§33), is the interplay of hieroglyphic signs associated with a multiplication of the phonetic values that were allocated to each sign. Learning this writing system thus involves an analysis of the means by which these values were acquired or derived. Moreover, studying texts from different temples allows one to become familiar with the particularities of the writing system developed by the priestly schools that were specific to each religious centre.

The interest contained within “Ptolemaic” texts arises as much from the light they shed upon the final centuries of paganism as it does from the knowledge they furnish about multiple aspects of the Egyptian religion. The Ptolemaic and Roman temples stood as veritable stone archives of Egyptian

traditions and they provide a matchless corpus of inscriptions (Fig. 25), elucidating foundation myths and compiling and glossing ancient priestly compendiums.

## EVOLUTION OF THE HIEROGLYPHIC SYSTEM

Too often seen as an independent script, “Ptolemaic” is on the contrary profoundly rooted in the hieroglyphic tradition, which contained from its very beginnings all the iconological modalities and resources that belong to an open (and theoretically infinite) writing system. A new reality (for instance, the introduction of the horse by the Hyksos) thus led to the creation of a logogram whose consonantal structure was then susceptible, following the rebus principle, to being employed in other combinations of words as a phonogram\* (§19). The sacred scribes/hierogrammats\* of the Ptolemaic and Roman period exploited the inherent possibilities of the hieroglyphic system time and again. The traditional corpora of texts from the Ramesside era, the Third Intermediate Period, and the Late Period attest to progressive developments of this practice. While alphabetical and archaising spelling, as well as games with multiple combinations of signs, became increasingly prominent in the Ptolemaic Period, these forms are the heirs of an ancestral tradition. A passage in the *Pyramid Texts* (§44) shows the use of the logogram of the shining sun  *psd* “shine” to represent the number “9” (*psd*), a rebus that will reappear often in the Ptolemaic era. Likewise the group  *prj* “enter and leave”, fashionable under the Ptolemies, is attested from the Ramesside period (variant of ). The so-called “sportive” spellings were already used in the New Kingdom and they developed in the Late Period, often to add an extra meaning or a decorative or “symbolic” complement to classic writing (§33).

## A STEADILY INCREASING NUMBER OF SIGNS

The increase in the number of hieroglyphic signs in comparison with middle Egyptian—from 700 to 7,000 according to the figures most often cited—has effectively branded “Ptolemaic” and disheartened many students. Without wishing to deny the creativity of the priests of the era, this calculation has been extensively reviewed in recent years, drastically reducing the number of new signs, notably discarding minor iconic variations that have no impact on usage. Currently, the evolution of the hieroglyphic system is considered to have led to the use of around 2,000–2,500 signs in the Graeco-Roman era. In addition, one should keep in mind the quantitative imbalance of the documentation: supposedly “Ptolemaic” signs (and values) will certainly be re-identified as older sources are published.

An increase in the number of phonetic values (sometimes ten or more) allocated to each hieroglyphic sign is certainly characteristic of “Ptolemaic”, but always within the inherent modalities of the traditional writing system. The acrophonic principle, which attributes a phonetic value to a sign on the basis of the first letter (or first fortis consonant) of the word associated with the sign, previously adopted by Étienne Drioton, was broadly contested by Herbert W. Fairman in 1943. While studying the texts of Edfu temple, Fairman revealed the consonantal principle. As a reflection of the evolution of the Egyptian language, it is characterised by the loss of lenis consonants and the adoption of the fortis consonant(s) of the biliteral\* or trilateral\* word: *jb > b*; *hw > h*; *jmꜥ > m*; *nhꜥhꜥ > nh*... Acrophony, however, is not absent from the rules for adopting phonetic values (*wn > w*), as S. Sauneron pointed out with regard to the texts of Esna, in particular in the litanies of the

**Crocodiles and rams for the god Khnum-Ra**

Two hymns in the temple of Esna very quickly excited the interest of J.-Fr. Champollion. Dedicated to the god Khnum-Ra, one was engraved with the sign of the ram, and the other with the sign of the crocodile (Fig. 26). Along with the multiple phonetic values and consonantal structures allotted to these two signs, attributes (especially crowns) and some hieroglyphic signs can guide the reader and explain the written forms. However, a deep understanding of the theology and scriptural practices of Esna temple are essential to crack “this unbelievable brainteaser” as S. Sauneron characterised it. It has been demonstrated that these hymns repeat epithets attested elsewhere “in plain language”, that is, in a common script in the temple. These parallel versions underline the fact that the texts have no “secret” character, but that they are, in the Roman era, the results of a final reflection on the possibilities of the hieroglyphic system.

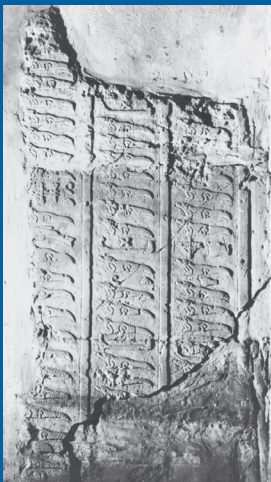








Fig. 26. Hymn dedicated to Khnum-Ra at Esna (after Esna II, no. 126). © IFAO, ts\_2000\_4031.


names of the divinities and their epithets. In an attempt to reconcile the two principles, S. Sauneron determined that the new alphabetic/uniliteral value of a sign was drawn from the “dominant articulation” of the original pluriliteral\* sign. This principle, which governs “Ptolemaic” writing, functioned concurrently with the evolutions of the language and writing (phonological changes and approximations, such as *b/p*, *k/g*, *s/h*, as well as influences and confusions arising from hieratic, etc.)





## PRIESTS AT PLAY: A GAME OF SIGNS

The hierogrammatists of the Graeco-Roman Period took advantage of the flexibility of the hieroglyphic system. They frequently made use of aesthetically pleasing composite signs ( *f3/j/f*,  *wmn-nfr*), of substitutions of identical or related signs, and of alphabetical spellings ( *hrd šps* “the august child”). Logograms and classifiers were interchangeably employed for the phonetic values associated with them. The use of rebuses as well as play with visual similarities are everywhere:  “7” *šb* (the head has seven orifices, and so  can in return mean “head” *tp*);  *nmjb* “styrax” (child *nm* + elephant *šb* > *jb*). The use of metonymy should also be mentioned (whereby the symbol of an object comes to represent the object itself, such as the use of the red and white crowns to represent *nswt-bjtj* “king of Upper and Lower Egypt”); of antonomasia (whereby the sign of a divinity takes on by association the phonetic value drawn from a characteristic epithet of this same divinity); of part-for-whole (*pars pro toto*) and whole-for-part (*plus pro parte*) transfers; and the use of the sign for a divinity’s emblematic animal to depict by association the phonetic values of the most significant epithets of that divinity (case in point, the signs of the baboon and ibis of Thoth). Whatever the new value or values attributed to a sign, its initial value remained in use.

## THE LAST SCHOLARS

The erudition of the priests responsible for the composition of texts covering temple walls highlights the inherent figurative potential of hieroglyphic writing, especially in the *bandeaux* inscriptions running along walls (Fig. 27) or the bases of columns. In these places, the use of signs representing living beings (often extremely detailed) were chosen to visually boost the graphic sequences in a manner that was common in the cryptographic inscriptions of the New Kingdom (§33). Through the consonantal system, the sign for the falcon *bjk* takes the value *b*, which becomes *p* through phonetic change; topped with the red crown of Neith\* (> *n*), the same falcon equals the simple demonstrative pronoun *pn*,

commonly used for its decorative aspect in texts on lower wall sections (see here in mid-sequence  *hrw pn nfr* “On this happy day...”).

Certain groups of signs thus create real compositions, both visually remarkable and with a theological meaning. Two final examples will suffice to demonstrate the power of these graphic games and the “added value” that they convey beyond the simple phonetic utterance. On a private funerary monument, Atum is written  along with the sign of the god, while the signs for an old man and a scarab express the fulfilment of the solar cycle (cf. the trigram  from the Ramesside era). The name Ptah (*Pth*) can be written , but the arrangement  constitutes a true vignette



**Fig. 27.** *Bandeau* inscription at Dendera: “Isis the great, mother of god, lady of the heaven, sovereign of all gods”.  
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that expresses the creative process of the god, separating heaven and earth. Theological understanding and exegesis are thus at the heart of the graphic construct.

“Ptolemaic” writing is distinguished by the utilisation of all the resources of the hieroglyphic system and an exuberantly creative, almost baroque playfulness, to such an extent that it can reach a degree of complexity that escapes Egyptologists. However, it is the systematisation of its scriptural potential over time that is most remarkable, where priests of previous eras had lesser matter to work with.