



## WHAT ARE HIEROGLYPHS?

THE CHARACTER-BASED SYSTEM of writing used by the ancient Egyptians is called hieroglyphics, and a single character is called a hieroglyph. The word hieroglyph means “holy carving” in Greek. Hieroglyphs make up the **sacred language of the pharaohs**, which was used to decorate monuments, tombs, and objects of daily life. Hieroglyphs fuse art and language, expressing meaning along with each author’s distinct style.

Hieroglyphs are not a form of picture writing. Knowing what a particular hieroglyph depicts does not generally reveal its meaning. Rather, most hieroglyphs **write sounds** in the Egyptian language. For example, an owl does not mean “owl.” Instead, it writes the sound “m.” There are more than 1,000 different hieroglyphic characters. The symbols show concepts or objects that were familiar to the ancient Egyptians.







## HOW DO WE READ HIEROGLYPHICS?

HIEROGLYPHICS CAN BE WRITTEN to be read horizontally or vertically, and from the left or from the right. The direction of the writing does not change its meaning. The characters generally appear in rows or bands, separated by lines. If the separating lines are horizontal, the text is meant to be read horizontally. If the separating lines are vertical, then the text is meant to be read vertically.

Any hieroglyph with a front or face, like a human or animal figure, will look toward the beginning of the text. The text should be read **toward the faces**, not away from them. Hieroglyphs are always read from top to bottom, never from bottom to top.

One quirk of the written Egyptian language is that it **rarely includes vowels**. Since no one speaks ancient Egyptian anymore, we don't know what it sounded like, or what vowels were used between consonants. Modern translators usually add the letter "e" between each consonant sound to make words easier to sound out.







## HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT HIEROGLYPHS MEAN?

IN AD 384, Christian Roman Emperor Theodosius abolished pagan rites in the temples of Egypt. Over the ensuing centuries, the ability to read and write hieroglyphs was lost. In 1799, a French officer in Napoleon's army discovered a stela carved with a decree in three languages: hieroglyphic, Demotic, and Greek. The remarkable object, now called the **Rosetta Stone**, after the town in which it was found, became the key to deciphering hieroglyphs once again.

Scholars had long assumed that hieroglyphics were a form of picture writing, but 19th-century French historian and linguist Jean-François Champollion took a different approach. He assumed the lines of Greek on the Rosetta Stone were a transcription of the hieroglyphs. Since he could read the Greek, he tried to **match up the characters** he knew with the characters he didn't.

His breakthrough came with the name "Ptolemy," which was written phonetically in hieroglyphs. Next, he unraveled the name "Cleopatra." From there, he started assigning **phonetic values** to each Egyptian symbol. This method allowed Champollion to successfully decipher how hieroglyphs were written. He dedicated the remainder of his life to translating the language.

