

EGYPTIAN WRITING & HISTORY

What significant historical events caused the evolution of Egyptian writing?

Introduction

Early Egyptian writing consisted of four scripts. Hieroglyphs, Hieratic and Demotic scripts were all non-alphabetic and a combination of pictographic/ideographic and phonetic symbols. The last writing system was Coptic, an alphabetic writing system that arose due to Egyptian occupation by the Greeks.

This poster explains the evolution of Egyptian writing over a span of 3000+ years. It examines the similarities and differences between the four writing styles as well as depiction of their transition and simplification over time. The timeline at the bottom of this poster shows major historical events in Egypt. The writing examples supporting these events are shown right above the timeline. The color-coded boxes below the timeline explain the development and the extinction of each of the writing systems. Each style is identified in its own color according to key shown to the right.

KEY

- RED Hieroglyphics
- BLUE Hieratic
- YELLOW Demotic
- GREEN Coptic
- PURPLE Greek/Misc.

Transitioning

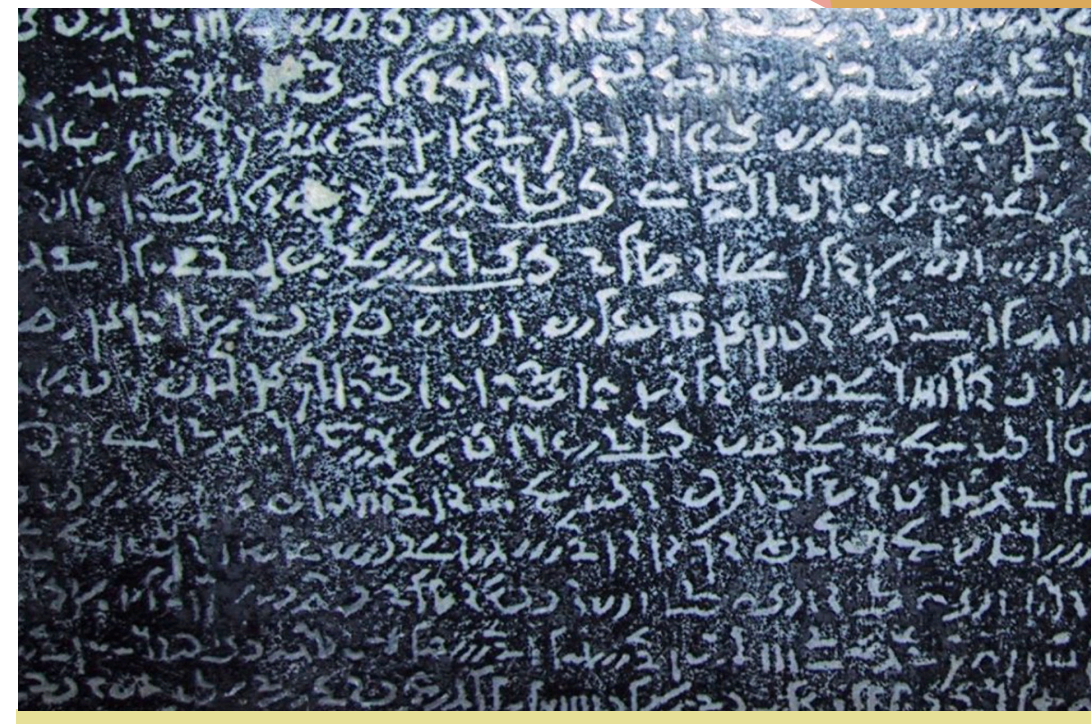
Simplification		Use of Alphabet	
Hieroglyphic	Hieroglyphic Book Hand	Hieratic	Demotic

There is a clear simplification of writing from Hieroglyphics to Hieratic and from Hieratic to Demotic. Symbols become more abstract, making it easier and faster to write but harder to decipher meaning just by image alone.

The Coptic alphabet was a clear transition in Egyptian writing as alphabetic writing was used for the first time in Egyptian history. Coptic was the Egyptian language written using the Greek Alphabet in addition to seven letters that were borrowed from Demotic to represent sounds not present in Greek.



Hieroglyphs found on the tomb of Minnakht. Minnakht had a high military rank during Tutankhamun's reign in the 18th dynasty. He was the heir to pharaoh Ay and most likely the pharaoh's son. Although he never became king, his prominent position in Egyptian royalty earned him a tomb beautifully decorated with Hieroglyphics.



Pictured above is one of the most famous examples of ancient Demotic writing found on the Rosetta Stone. The script writes about the wonderful things king Ptolemy V Epiphanes had done during his first year ruling as Pharaoh.



Above is beautifully written Hieratic found on a piece of papyrus. Papyrus is a plant that grew in abundance in ancient Egypt and was used to create paper-like material. This image shows papyrus being used for writing religious material in Hieratic.

Coptic

- 400 AD onward
- Combines ancient Egyptian language with Greek letters as a political need after Greek occupation of Egypt
- Written using Greek Alphabet in addition to seven Egyptian sing-letters borrowed from Demotic (to represent sounds that did not appear in Greek)
- Uses a lettering system
- Meant to be more efficient than previous styles
- Vowels are used for the first time, allowing dialects to be distinguished

DID YOU KNOW?
"Rebus principle" is the human discovery that symbols can be language rather than just objects. This eventually led to the creation of an alphabetic writing system.

Pictured above is an example of Coptic writing, which developed during Egyptian occupation by Greece. This is a single page in a book listing different prayers commonly used at the time.

Important Points to Notice

- Writing transitions were for political reasons
- Different writing styles overlapped and occurred at the same time
- None of the scripts entirely replaced others
- The names of the scripts have current meanings that make sense based on how they were used in the past.
 - "Demotic" means denoting or relating to the kind of language used by ordinary people, representing its use by the common people in Egypt
 - "Hieratic" means of or concerning of priests, which represented its writing transition into a religious script once Demotic became the major language in Egypt

Cartouche of King Menes
3150 BC
A piece of stone with a vertical hieroglyphic imprinting of the name "Menes"

Menes is the legendary first king of Egypt. However, there is no evidence about any "Menes" in history. Therefore, Narmer is recognized as the first ruler of Egypt. It was concluded that "Menes" is only a title meaning "the who endures" and not an actual name. It is now accepted that "Menes" is associated with Narmer or Narmer's son Hor Aha. "Menes" is commonly found in ancient hieroglyphs because the unification of Egypt by the first king was of great cultural and religious importance to the country.

Narmer Palette
3100 BC
A makeup palette picturing King Narmer conquering his enemies

Although the Narmer Palette does not depict traditional hieroglyphs, the usage of pictures also tells a story. There are numerous examples of the story of unification in hieroglyphics. Narmer is the first historical pharaoh of Egypt. Around 3150 BC, he united upper and lower Egypt. Many Hieroglyphs were created depicting his success for a few reasons. First, it was not only a significant event at the time but also a significant event in Egyptian history. Because of this it was worth the effort to put into Hieroglyphics. Also, during this period of time Hieroglyphics were formally developed and used broadly.

Label of Vessel with name of King Hor Aha (Menes)
3000 BC
A piece of stone with the name of the second king of Egypt carved on it

Hor Aha is the son of the first King of Egypt, Narmer, and is sometimes referred to as "Menes," a title meaning "the who endures." This piece shows a more cursive form of Hieroglyphs which is the writing form of hieratic script and was created when hieroglyphics had recently been formed as there was a need for quicker method of writing for day-to-day script.

Exercise tablet in hieratic script from "The Instructions of Amenemhat"
~ 1500 BC
An exercise tablet from a poem during the 17th Dynasty with a reign of Amenhotep 1 between 1514 – 1493 BC

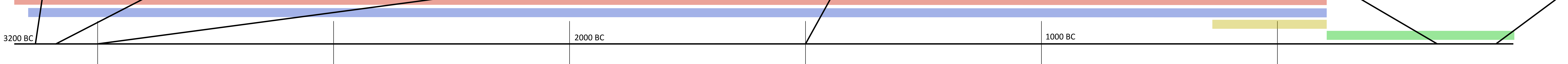
The use of hieratic writing is pictured on this tablet during the time when hieratic writing was very common across Egypt. The content of the tablet is a poem about King Amenemhat's ghost discussing with his son Senusret on how to rule. King Amenemhat had been murdered and he encourages his son to trust no-one. The poem also works to justify the deeds of the old king during his reign.

The Rosetta Stone
196 BC
Famous, large stone with multiple styles of writing and languages present on it

The Rosetta Stone is one of the most famous artifacts of ancient writing. It is written in two languages, Egyptian and Greek, and in 3 scripts, Hieroglyphics "the language of the gods," Demotic "the language of the document," and Greek "the language of the government." It was written in 196 BC, using the Greek occupation of Egypt. The stone was written by Egyptian priests in honor of the first anniversary of the coronation of Ptolemy V Epiphanes, who was the king of Egypt at the time. It lists many of the king's beneficial actions during his reign. The Rosetta stone is most notably the last time Hieroglyphs and Demotic were used in writing, as they had mostly died out around 200 years prior to the stone being created. However, as a tribute to their old culture, the priests used both Hieroglyphics and Demotic in their writing on the Rosetta Stone.

Letter by Ammon
~50 BC
A letter from "Ammon" (Lawyer from Panopolis) while on business trip in Alexandria to his mother. During Greek/Roman Occupation

Ammon has been in the capital for some time and is writing to his family to send his regards. In the letter he greets his mother and explains the business he is trying to accomplish in Alexandria. At this time in Egypt, Greeks have completely taken over the government and any Egyptian with status, as Ammon had, would have been familiar with Coptic writing. Also, this letter is written on papyrus, the most commonly used material for writing at the time.



Late Predynastic (3150 BC – 2950 BC)

- North and South Egypt become unified state by king Narmer
- Narmer is worshiped by many as a god
- Narmer founds Memphis as the capital city of Egypt
- Some of the first Hieroglyphic texts are created and are mostly with religious content

Early Dynastic (2950 BC – 2575 BC)

Hieroglyphs developing
Unification brought with it a widespread use of a single writing system. This system was Hieroglyphics.

Hieratic developing
There was a need for faster and more practical way of writing and storing information. So, Hieratic writing took form. It is structurally identical to Hieroglyphs but a more cursive form. It was used for day to day script and commonly founds on papyrus, written in ink

DID YOU KNOW?
Our word "papyrus" is derived from Papyrus - a material that was used for everyday writing similar to how we use paper today.

Old Kingdom (2575 BC – 2150 BC)

Demotic developing
Demotic developed while Egypt is conquered and occupied other civilizations. Reasons for this include:
 • Spread of new and more efficient writing methods brought from conquerors
 • More coherence in writing and spread of information across the country as the country is unified after a long intermediate period.
 Demotic was considered the the everyday language once it arose.
 - Today, "Demotic" means denoting or relating to the king of language used by ordinary people, which represents Demotic's usage in Egypt

Intermediate Period

What happens to Hieroglyphics
Begins to die out as Egypt and their ancient writing loses its value to the more modern system of Coptic comes to be

Middle Kingdom (1975 BC – 1640 BC)

What happens to Hieratic
Hieratic began to be used in religious text when Demotic takes over for day to day script.
 - Today, "Hieratic" means of or concerning of priests, which represented this writing transition
 Eventually Hieratic script will completely die out as the alphabetic system of Coptic writing becomes widely used.

Intermediate Period

What happens to Demotic
Begins to die out as Egypt switched over the Alphabetic writing system (Coptic) because of Greek's rule

New Kingdom (1520 BC – 1075 BC)

Late Period (715 BC – 332 BC)

Greeks were appointed to all senior positions in the country making Greek the most common language to be written down and heavily used in the government
 The new Greek city of Alexandria was established as the capital
 There was an effort to create a Universal culture between Greek and Egyptian
 All of these factors pushed the development of Coptic and loss of Hieroglyphs, Hieratic and Demotic writing

Ptolemaic Period (332 BC – 30 BC)

Coptic developing
Coptic began to develop as Egypt welcomed and relied on the Greeks. Reasons for this include:
 • Need for easier communication between the two languages
 • Need for more coherent language transitions to be able to merge cultures