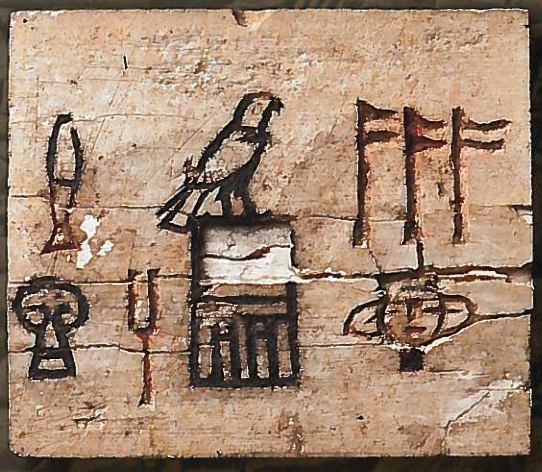




# Visible Language

## Inventions of Writing in the Ancient Middle East and Beyond

Edited by
Christopher Woods
with
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# VISIBLE LANGUAGE

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*edited by*

CHRISTOPHER WOODS

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# 10. PTOLEMAIC HIEROGLYPHS

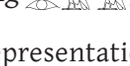
FRANÇOIS GAUDARD

The designation "Ptolemaic hieroglyphs" is used by Egyptologists to refer to the script employed by the scribes of Egyptian temples after the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great until the end of the second century AD. Also called figurative or cryptographic hieroglyphs, they are not only synonymous with extreme complication, obscure puns, and strange puzzles, but also with intense challenge and excitement. Their figurative nature misled early scholars into regarding the hieroglyphic script as purely symbolic.

To a layman these signs would probably look like standard hieroglyphs, but to an uninitiated Egyptologist their interpretation is like exploring a *terra incognita*, and for good reason. Indeed, during the Middle Kingdom and the beginning of the New Kingdom, the number of signs commonly used by the scribes totaled about 760, but in the latest periods of Egyptian history many new signs were created and the corpus of hieroglyphs grew to several thousand signs (see, e.g., Daumas et al. 1988–1995). Concurrently, there was also a significant increase in the number of phonetic values that could be attributed to a single sign. A hieroglyph that in classical Egyptian was read in one or two ways could now have up to twenty or even thirty different readings, as in the case of the sign , usually identified as a pustule. Moreover, a single word could also be written in various and complicated ways, making the script all the more difficult to decipher.

However, if it is true that the use of cryptography reached its peak during the Greco-Roman period, it was not restricted to that era. Indeed, sportive writings are attested, although rarely, as early as the Old Kingdom. They were used during the Middle Kingdom and also occurred, for instance, in the royal funerary compositions of the New Kingdom inscribed in tombs such as those of Tutankhamun and Ramesses VI (see, e.g., Darnell 2004). It is in these early examples that the origins of the principles of cryptography in the Ptolemaic and Roman periods must be sought.

As unpredictable as such a system may seem at first sight, it was nonetheless logical and followed precise rules. What makes the signs so difficult to interpret is in fact the innovative approach used by scribes to apply old principles. Some of the ways through which signs could acquire their values were:

1) The "consonantal principle," by which multi-consonantal signs could retain only the value of their strongest consonant (e.g., the sign , usually read *ib*, could stand for the letter *b*, its weak consonant, namely, *i*, being dropped).
2) The "acrophonic principle," by which multi-consonantal signs could retain only the value of their first consonant, regardless of whether it was strong or weak (e.g., the sign , usually read *wn*, could stand for the letter *w*).
3) The "rebus principle," by which a word could be written using a picture of something that had the same sound (e.g., the sign  from the word *mn*(*t*) "thigh" could stand for the phonogram *mn*(*t*) in the word  *mnmnt* "herd of cattle," the standard writing of which was ).
4) The "*pars pro toto* principle," by which part of a sign could stand for the entire sign (e.g., the sign of the pupil  could stand for the whole eye , hence the writing of the verb *mȝ͗* "to see" as  instead of , a more traditional writing being ).

Other reasons, including direct representation, derivation from hieratic, or the combination of several of the above-mentioned principles, could also be at the origin of a sign's value, but such a study is beyond the scope of the present discussion.[1]

One of the consequences of the application of these principles was a break with the traditional orthographic conventions, making the words much

more difficult to recognize. For example, let us consider the word  *ršwt* "joy," which could be written , with the gods Re () and Shu () standing respectively for the sounds *r* and *šw*, and the goddess Tefnut () for the final *t*. Also noteworthy is the sign of the head , which could stand for the number seven  *sfḫ*, simply because the head has seven openings, namely, two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, and a mouth. It also worked the other way around, and for the same reason the number seven could stand for the word  *tp* "head." Of course, depending on the context, the sign  could be read as *tp* "head" and the group  be read as *sfḫ* "seven," since traditional writings were used concurrently with new ones. As mentioned above, there was also a significant increase in the number of phonetic values that could be attributed to a single sign. As a matter of interest, the traditional readings of the vulture hieroglyph  were *mt, mwt*, and sometimes *nr*, but in Ptolemaic hieroglyphs the same sign could be read as the phonograms *m*, *n*, *nr*, *nḥ*, *š*, *štȝ*, *šṯy*, *qd*, *t*, *ty*, *tyw*, *ṯ*, *d*, or as the words *wnm* "right," *mwt* "mother," *mkỉ* "to protect," *nỉwt* "city," *nrỉ* "to fear," *nrt* "vulture," *nṯrt* "goddess," *rmṯ* "man," and *rnpt* "year." The use of new signs and innovative combinations of signs were also frequent. For example, the vulture hieroglyph could be combined with the horns of an ox . As a result, the new sign  was read *wpt-rnpt* "New Year's Day" (lit., "the opening of the year"), with the horns standing here for the word *wpt* "opening," and the vulture for *rnpt* "year." Note that the traditional writings of *wpt-rnpt* were  or . Another good example is the divine name  *Wnn-nfrw* "Onnophris," a designation for Osiris that could display several new forms, including, among others: 1)  (a desert hare [*wn*] holding the sign of the heart and windpipe [*nfr*]); 2)  (a flower [*wn*] within a coiled lotus [*nfr*]); 3)  (two lotus flowers [respectively *wn* and *nfr*] within a cartouche, with the variants  and ). Similarly, writings of the traditional title  *nsw-bỉty* "King of Upper and Lower Egypt" were as various as , , , , , or . Sometimes a single sign could even stand for an entire phrase, as in the case of the sign  rendering the phrase *dỉ ꜥnḫ mỉ Rꜥ* "given life like Re," traditionally written  but replaced here with a cat (*mỉ*) wearing a solar disk (*Rꜥ*) on its head and giving (*dỉ*) an *ankh*, symbol of life (*ꜥnḫ*).[2]

In a quest for virtuosity in their theological exegesis, the ancient priests realized that the system could be pushed one step further. Indeed, in addition to being used for their phonetic values, the signs themselves, by their very shape, could also recall ideas and theological concepts. A well-known example is the name of the Memphite creator god Ptah, whose traditional writing  *Pṯḥ* is also attested under the cryptographic form  consisting of the sign  *pt* "sky" standing for  *p*, the god  *Ḥḥ* "Heh" for  *ḥ*, and the sign  *tȝ* "earth" for  *t*. Note that for symbolic reasons these three logograms appear as *pḥt*, but the correct phonetic order, namely, *pṯḥ*, was easy to restore for someone in the know. The ingenious selection and disposition of the signs in the group  depicting the god Heh with upraised arms, separating the earth from the sky, evoked the creation of the world performed by the god Ptah according to the Memphite theology. Thus, with a single group of signs, one could both read the name of Ptah (*Pṯḥ*) expressed in cryptographic form and be reminded of a major act of creation. This complicated process tended to be used in conjunction with a system by which the meaning of divine and geographical names, in particular, could be explained through sacred etymologies based on puns. By virtue of this principle of verbal analogy, the name of the god Amun  *ỉmn*, whose pronunciation was similar to that of the word *ỉmn* "to be hidden," could also be written using the sign of the man hiding behind a wall . On the basis of this etymology, the god could be referred to as "the hidden one." Another cryptogram of Amun, already known from earlier periods, was the graphic combination , for which various interpretations have been proposed. One of the most convincing is the following (see Van Rinsveld 1993): the sign , used for the word *ỉw* "island," can also stand for the letter *ỉ*. As for the sign , it is nothing but the standard writing of the letter *n*. In the group , note that  *n* is in  *ỉ*. Given that the preposition "in" corresponds to *m* in Egyptian, the phrase "*n* in *ỉ*" was said *n m ỉ*, which was also the name of Amun written backwards (*nmỉ* for *ỉmn*). Therefore, the name of the chief god of Thebes was hidden twice, first in the cryptogram  and again in the retrograde writing *nmỉ*, which perfectly fits the above-mentioned etymology of his name. As artificial and inaccurate as it may seem to modern

eyes, this method was nonetheless extremely popular during all periods of Egyptian history.

Depending on the nature of the texts, the Ptolemaic hieroglyphic script could exhibit greater or lesser degrees of complication. One can in fact distinguish between two types of scripts: the first type, which could be referred to as "common," includes a certain percentage of new signs and phonetic values, but once these are known, texts written in such a script can generally be read without major difficulties. However, the other type of script, where each sign has been carefully chosen, is extremely complicated and would even pose a challenge to an experienced Egyptologist (see Sauneron 1974, p. 46). Texts of this latter type are well represented by two famous hymns inscribed in the hall of the temple of Esna in the late first century AD, one of them being composed almost entirely with signs depicting a ram and the other with signs depicting a crocodile (see, e.g., Leitz 2001).

When confronted with such a profusion of subtleties, complications, and sophisticated signs, the reader may wonder about the motivations of the ancient scribes. While it might be tempting at first to see this system as a means of concealing sacred knowledge from the uninitiated, several indications seem to point in a different direction, making such an explanation rather unlikely. Indeed, due to their placement high on the walls, several of the texts inscribed in temples remained illegible to the visitor and were obviously not meant to be read (see Sauneron 1982, p. 51). For this reason, there was apparently no need to hide their content, since they "were effectively answerable in detail only to the gods" (Baines 2007, p. 47). Moreover, important theological texts could be composed in a perfectly accessible script, while inscriptions of lesser importance were sometimes written in a highly cryptographic one (see Sauneron 1982, p. 52). All of this suggests that the use of such a script should best be viewed as part of an intellectual game rather than as a deliberate attempt at hiding any secret lore.

Some scholars wrongly considered Ptolemaic hieroglyphs to be a degenerate product of a civilization in decline, whereas we are in fact dealing with the ultimate outcome of an age-old science, whose keepers' boundless ingenuity and deep knowledge command respect and admiration.

## NOTES

[1] For further discussion, see, for example, Kurth 2007; compare also Fairman 1943 and 1945.

[2] On the process of creating new signs from older signs by assimilation or amalgam and on the influence of hieratic on the hieroglyphic script, see Meeks 2004, pp. x–xviii.

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