

The Evolution of Egyptian Hieroglyphs

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Stele of the scribe Minnakht around 1321 B.C. Scribes were very educated and often worked with painters and artisans. Together, they made hieroglyphs like this one. Photo by: Clio20/Wikimedia Commons.

The early Egyptians wrote using a system called hieroglyphics. They used elegant pictures, or hieroglyphs, instead of letters.

In the ancient Egyptian language, hieroglyphs were called *medu netjer*, or "the gods' words." It was believed that writing was invented by the gods.

The Egyptians used a large number of different hieroglyphs. The English alphabet has 26 letters, but the Egyptians may have had more than 1,000 hieroglyphs.



The gift of writing

According to Egyptian tradition, the god Thoth created writing to make the Egyptians wiser and to strengthen their memory. The god Re, however, said that giving writing to humans was a bad idea. He thought that people should use their minds instead of texts. In Re's view, writing would make people less wise and give them a poor memory.

Still, Thoth gave writing to a small number of Egyptians, called the scribes. In ancient Egypt, scribes were very respected for their knowledge. They were the only ones who could read and write.

Pictures in place of words

Before hieroglyphics, the first Egyptians drew pictures on rock walls. Some of the signs on these rock images are also found on pottery from 3500–3200 B.C., more than 5,000 years ago. The pots were buried in the tombs of rich Egyptians.

One of these tombs is inside a cemetery called Abydos. In this tomb, hundreds of jars were found with labels on them. The labels said where the goods came from, who owned them or what was inside them. The Egyptians were very careful about keeping records.

The labels found in the tomb were carved on small rectangles of wood or bone. Usually, the Egyptians wrote on a kind of thick paper called papyrus. They also used bone, metal and leather as tools for writing.

A life story carved in stone

By 3000 B.C., the Egyptians carved hieroglyphs into special stones when a ruler died. On the stone, they wrote about the king's life and his great actions.

Around 2500 B.C. the Egyptians wrote the "Pyramid Texts." These were found on the walls of pyramids and are some of the oldest examples of Egyptian literature.

Over time, many new forms of writing were used. Priests and scribes, the expert writers of the kingdom, wanted to make hieroglyphics simpler. By the year 600 A.D., script in Egypt did not use pictures at all. A form of hieroglyphics was still used, but mostly for important religious writings.

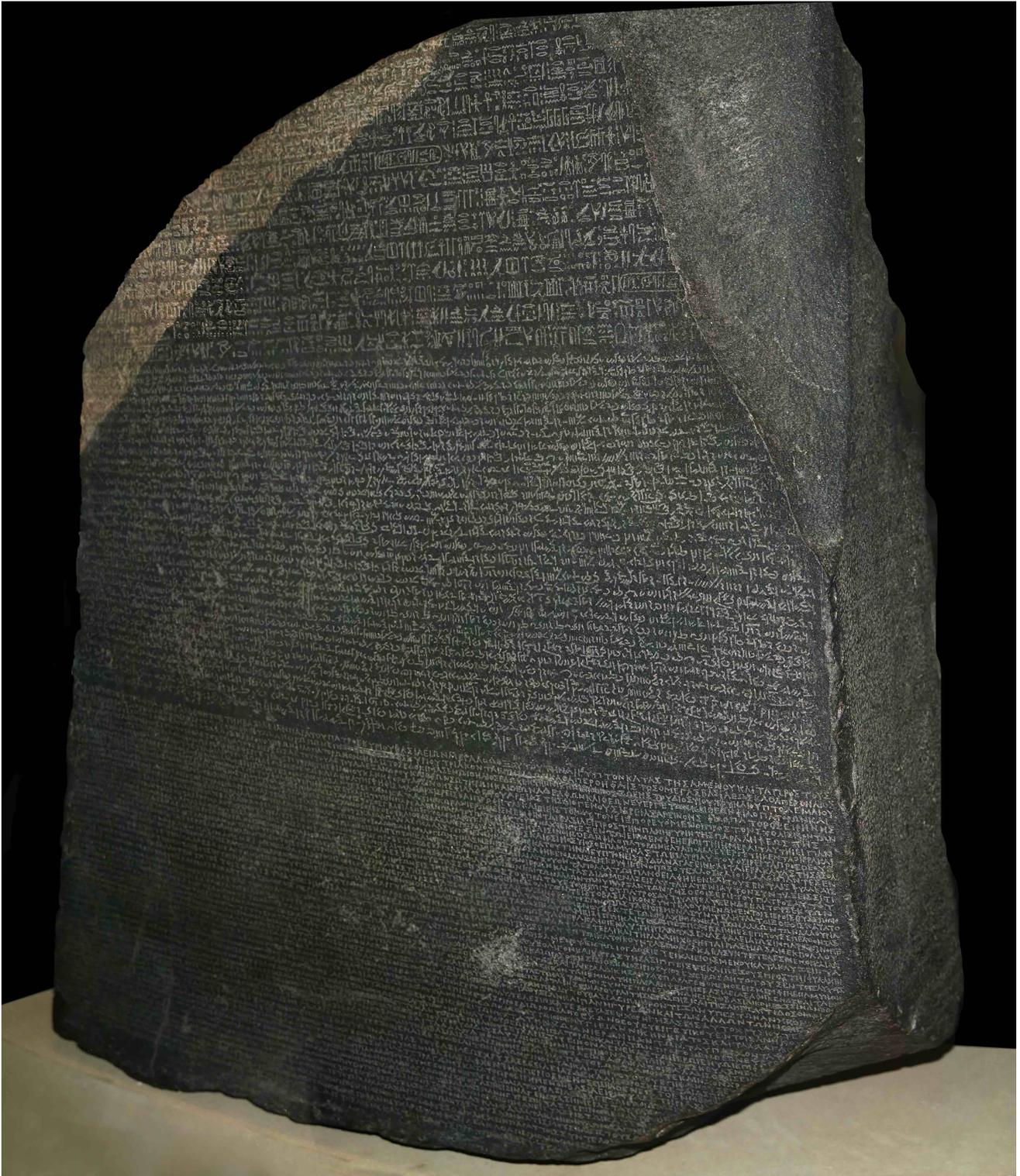
Christianity brought its own alphabet

From 332 B.C. to about A.D. 395, Greek and Roman culture started to influence Egypt more. These cultures came from Europe on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea. Toward A.D. 100, the religion of Christianity started to take over the Egyptian religion.

Christian Egyptians wrote using the Coptic alphabet, a different version of the Egyptian language. This alphabet had 32 letters. Examples of the Coptic alphabet were found sometime around A.D. 200.

Egyptian hieroglyphs were replaced by the Coptic alphabet. The written language of the old gods disappeared for nearly 2,000 years.

The mysterious Rosetta Stone



For many years, no one knew how to read hieroglyphs anymore. Then, in 1799, the Rosetta Stone was discovered. On this stone, a speech by the Egyptian king Ptolemy V from 196 B.C. had been written down. The same text was written in three languages, once in Greek, once in hieroglyphics and once in another Egyptian script called demotic. Demotic was a kind of writing that came later and had no pictures.

A man named Jean-François Champollion used the Rosetta Stone to crack the code of hieroglyphs. He compared the Egyptian signs with the Greek words he knew. He figured out how to write the name of Ptolemy V. Then, he compared the words with other objects found in Egypt.

He found out that ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic writing was not a normal alphabet. Its pictures stood for sounds, ideas and words, not letters. Champollion discovered the secret of ancient Egyptian writing and allowed the world to finally learn about Egyptian history.