

How to read Egyptian Hieroglyphs

Hieroglyphs are pictures which can be read. What do you think this means?



It's an eye and a deer.... so it means "idea". Does that make sense?

Hieroglyphs can represent individual sounds, whole words or can tell you about the words coming before or after them... It can get quite complicated!

Sometimes they look like the thing they represent:



This is the hieroglyph for an Egyptian nobleman - and is a picture of an important man sitting on a chair holding a symbol of authority.

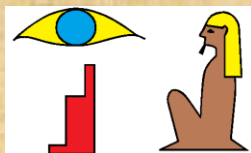
and sometimes they don't:



This symbol means life.

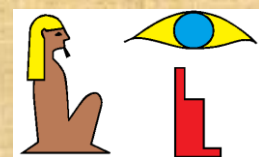
Hieroglyphs are always read from top to bottom but sometimes you start on the left side (like in English) and sometimes on the right.

The animals, birds or people used in hieroglyphs always face the beginning of the sentence so that tells you where to start.



The man is facing to his left, so we start reading from the top left... so that's the eye symbol, then the throne and then the seated man.

The man here is facing to his right, so we start reading from the right hand side... It says exactly the same thing but all the symbols are reversed.



Egyptian hieroglyphs were often colourful like these although most of the colour has now gone because they were made so long ago. Do you think it would be good if you wrote all your school work in different colours for each word?

This group of hieroglyphs go together to mean Osiris (an Egyptian god). Sometimes we read groups of hieroglyphs together when we translate them.



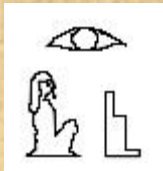
This is a small statue of a man called Hori-Nakht. He lived in Egypt during the nineteenth dynasty - around 1295 to 1186 BC.

It is called a shabti and would have been put in Hori-Nakht's tomb.

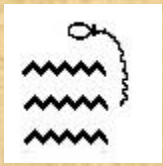
On the right below is the complete panel from the front of Hori Nakht's apron:

We can split this into groups of signs, translate them and finally put everything back together to read a text written by an ancient Egyptian more than three thousand years ago.

Remember we start from top to bottom and then read in lines across, starting where the animals are looking...



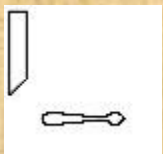
Osiris These three symbols - the eye, the throne and the seated god - together represent the Egyptian god Osiris.



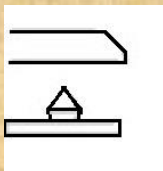
Pure These symbols show water pouring from a container with three lines of water. This can be used to describe something or someone as pure or as a w'b priest - a pure priest.



Hori-Nakht This is the name of the person who owned the shabti - his name is made up of the sounds of this group of hieroglyphs.



Justified This can be translated as 'justified' and means that the person it describes has passed the test of the weighing of the heart ceremony and has been allowed to enter the Egyptian afterlife.



At Peace This is a symbol of an altar or offering table and means to be 'at peace.'



So altogether, this reads:

"The Osiris, the w'b priest Hori-Nakht, justified and at peace."

Congratulations. You can read real ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs!