

Ancient Egypt

Hieroglyphic Examples and Alphabet

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Types of Symbols

When archeologists first studied Egyptian hieroglyphics they thought that each symbol represented a word. However, it turns out that the writing is more complex than that. A symbol can represent a word, a sound, a syllable, or a concept.

Words



In some cases, the symbol represents a full word. These symbols are called ideograms or logograms.

You can see in the picture on the right how the symbol of the woman simply means the word "woman". The same with the man. Some symbols may represent more than one word depending on the context of how they are used and the other symbols around them. The same symbol used for "sun" can also mean "light."

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Alphabet

Just like in our writing, some Ancient Egyptian symbols represented a sound. These symbols are called phonograms.

We've shown in the picture below some comparisons of symbols and how they

might relate to our alphabet. You will note that there are cases where two different symbols have the same sound (see the letter "Y" at the bottom). This is just like we have when some of our letters can make the same sound depending on the word (for example "c" and "k").



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Ancient Egyptian Alphabet

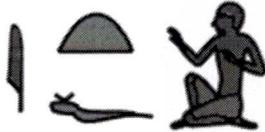
Syllable

Some symbols represented a full syllable of two or three consonants. These symbols are also called phonograms. Examples include sounds like "sh" or "ch."

Concept



to know,
to understand



father



plural

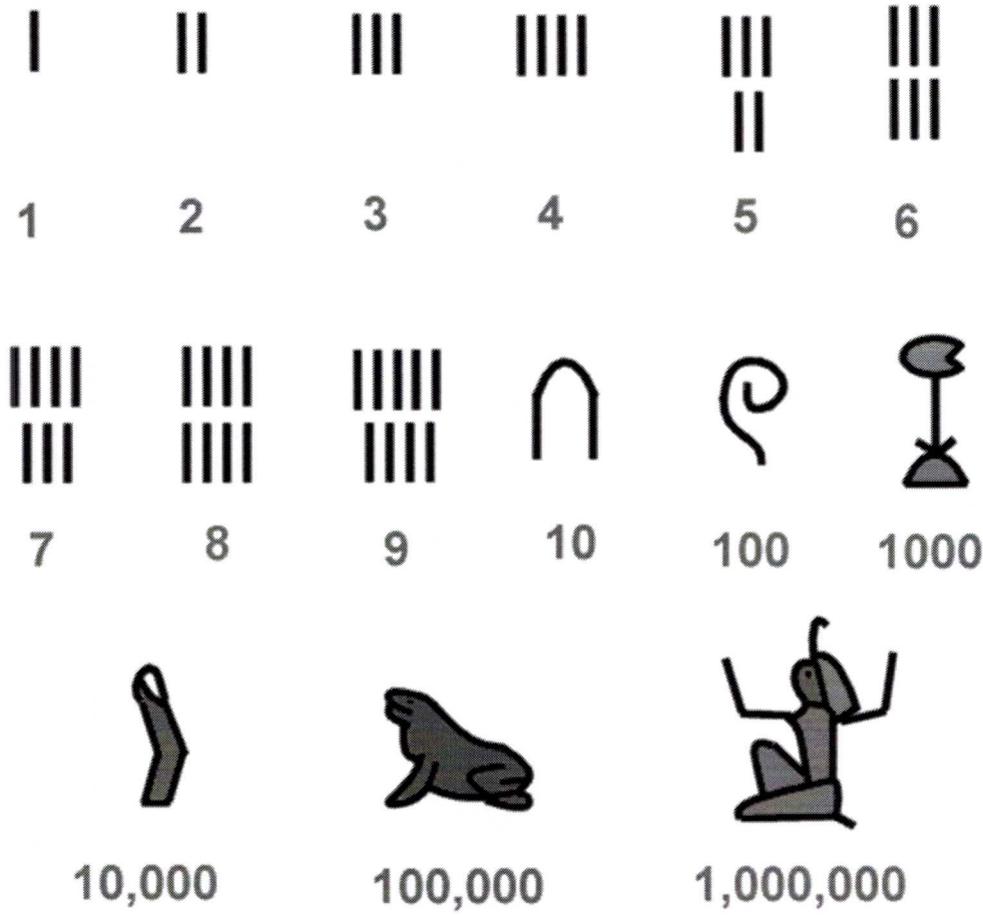
Other symbols helped with the overall concept of a word or idea. These symbols are called determinatives. In some cases, two words may sound the same but have different meanings. Sort of like the words "see" and "sea.". They sound the same, but have different meanings. Determinatives were used to distinguish between these types of words. One type of determinative was the symbol of a man (see the picture to the right). It gives the masculine meaning to a word "father."

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Sometimes two or more symbols together had a specific meaning. Like the three lines in a row which mean that the word was plural. Sort of like adding an "s" to a word.

Numbers

The Egyptians also had hieroglyphs for numbers. Their number system was based on the scale of ten like ours. You can see the symbols they used for numbers in the pictures below. They used a single line to represent a 1; a heel bone for 10; a coil of rope for 100; a water lily for 1,000; a bent finger for 10,000; a frog or a tadpole for 100,000; and the god Heh for 1,000,000.



The symbols were written together to make up more complex numbers. For example, the number 123 would have a coil of rope, 2 heel bones, and three lines. Just like words and letters, the numbers could be written left to right, right to left, or top to bottom.

Interesting Facts about the Hieroglyphic Alphabet

- The Ancient Egyptians called their writing the "language of the gods."
- The code of how Egyptian hieroglyphs can be translated was discovered by Jean-Francois Champollion in 1822.
- In mathematics, the "walking" symbol (see above) was used for addition and the "backwards" symbol (see above) was used for subtraction.
- There were no hieroglyphic words for the common English words "the", "a", or "and."