NO PREP

Hieroglyphics and the Rosetta Stone

Cracking the Code

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Hieroglyphics and the Rosetta Stone: Cracking the Code

A Language Lost for 1,400 Years

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For nearly fourteen centuries, the elaborate symbols carved on Egyptian temple walls were completely unreadable. When the last trained hieroglyphic scribes died in the fourth and fifth centuries CE, knowledge of how to read the ancient Egyptian writing system died with them. The symbols remained visible everywhere (on obelisks shipped to Rome, on temple carvings, on papyri in museums) but they were utterly silent. Medieval travelers assumed they were purely symbolic, perhaps religious icons. Some early European scholars proposed elaborate theories involving secret mystical meanings encoded in the symbols. The truth turned out to be more elegant: hieroglyphics worked, at its core, much like other writing systems. Ancient Egypt used three related scripts. Hieroglyphics (from the Greek words for 'sacred carvings') was the formal monumental script carved on temple walls, tombs, and public monuments. It was ornate, complex, and time-consuming to produce. For everyday use, Egyptian scribes developed hieratic, a cursive script written with a brush on papyrus, which simplified the hieroglyphic symbols into quicker strokes. Later still, an even simpler script called demotic developed for administrative and commercial use. All three scripts could represent the same Egyptian language: they were, in essence, different 'fonts' for the same system.

The Rosetta Stone: Three Languages, One Message

The key to deciphering hieroglyphics arrived not through a sudden flash of inspiration but through a lucky accident of Napoleon's Egyptian campaign. In 1799, French soldiers digging defensive fortifications near the town of Rosetta (Rashid) in the Nile Delta unearthed a large black granodiorite slab. Carved on its surface was a decree issued in 196 BCE by Egyptian priests honoring Pharaoh Ptolemy V. The same text appeared three times: once in hieroglyphics, once in demotic, and once in

ancient Greek. Since ancient Greek was still a well-understood language, scholars immediately recognized the Rosetta Stone's potential as a translation key. The British captured the stone from the French in 1801, and it has been in the British Museum ever since. This has been a source of ongoing controversy, as Egypt has repeatedly requested its return. European scholars spent the following two decades trying to crack the hieroglyphic text using the Greek as a guide. They correctly identified proper names, including Ptolemy, by spotting them enclosed in oval cartouches (the oval rings that surrounded royal names). But the full decipherment required one more crucial insight.

Champollion's Breakthrough

Jean-Francois Champollion was a French scholar who had been obsessed with Egyptian writing since childhood. By the time he was a teenager, he had already taught himself Coptic: the liturgical language of Egyptian Christians, which descended directly from ancient Egyptian and was still used in church services. This knowledge of Coptic would prove decisive. While other scholars assumed hieroglyphics were purely symbolic, each symbol representing a concept, Champollion recognized that the system was partly phonetic: some symbols represented sounds, not just ideas. In September 1822, Champollion cracked the code. He compared cartouches from the Rosetta Stone and another bilingual inscription from Philae, identifying the names Ptolemy and Cleopatra in the hieroglyphic text. By matching shared letters between the two names, he established a phonetic alphabet for the script. His knowledge of Coptic allowed him to recognize that the sounds he was recovering matched ancient Egyptian word forms still preserved in the Coptic liturgy. On September 14, 1822, Champollion burst into his brother's office in Paris, shouted 'I've got it!' and promptly fainted from excitement. He had just deciphered 3,500 years of Egyptian texts.

What Hieroglyphics Actually Were

Once the code was cracked, scholars discovered that hieroglyphics was a sophisticated mixed system. It contained logograms — symbols representing whole words or concepts (a picture of a sun meaning 'sun'). It contained phonograms — symbols representing sounds (a mouth symbol representing the sound 'r'). And it contained determinatives — non-pronounced symbols placed at the end of words to indicate their category (a seated man symbol indicating the preceding word referred

to a male person). This combination of logographic and phonetic elements made hieroglyphics both flexible and complex, capable of recording poetry, scientific observations, tax records, and religious hymns. Learning to write hieroglyphics required years of study. Egyptian scribes began their training as children, copying texts until they could reproduce hundreds of symbols accurately. The scribe was one of the most prestigious professions in ancient Egypt — educated, often well-paid, and exempted from manual labor. A famous Egyptian text called the 'Satire of the Trades' extols the scribe's life over every other occupation: 'Be a scribe! It saves you from toil and protects you from all manner of work.' Literacy in ancient Egypt was limited to perhaps 1-3% of the population — mostly men, though some women of high status also learned to read and write.

What the Texts Tell Us

The decipherment of hieroglyphics opened a library of extraordinary scope. The Pyramid Texts (c. 2400 BCE) carved inside Old Kingdom pyramids are among the oldest religious texts in the world. The Book of the Dead is a collection of spells meant to guide the soul through the afterlife. The Story of Sinuhe, written during the Middle Kingdom, is considered a masterpiece of ancient literature — a tale of exile and return that reads with surprising emotional depth. Letters, tax records, medical texts, love poems, and school exercise tablets have all been recovered, giving Egyptologists direct access to the voices of people who lived 3,000 to 4,000 years ago. The Rosetta Stone itself remains in the British Museum, displayed in room 4 and consistently the museum's most-visited object. Egypt officially requested its return in 2003 and again in 2022, citing the stone's cultural significance as part of the nation's heritage. The British Museum has so far declined, citing its role as a 'world museum.' The debate mirrors broader questions about colonial-era collection practices and who has the right to own the past.

Key Information: Hieroglyphics and the Rosetta Stone

Detail	Information
Script Types	Hieroglyphics (formal), hieratic (everyday), demotic (administrative)

Detail	Information
Lost For	Approximately 1,400 years after final trained scribes died
Rosetta Stone Date	Carved 196 BCE; discovered by French soldiers in 1799
Stone Material	Black granodiorite; weighs approximately 762 kg
Languages on Stone	Hieroglyphics, demotic, and ancient Greek
Decipherer	Jean-Francois Champollion, September 14, 1822
Champollion's Key	Knowledge of Coptic language (descended from ancient Egyptian)
Cartouche	Oval ring surrounding royal names in hieroglyphic inscriptions
Scribe Literacy Rate	Estimated 1-3% of ancient Egyptian population
Current Location	British Museum, London; Egypt has requested its return

Case Study: The Apprentice's Thousandth Line

Kha-em-waset was twelve years old, and his hand hurt. He had been copying the same passage from the Book of Thoth for three hours, his rush pen moving carefully across the practice papyrus. The symbols had to be perfect — the master scribe, Amenhotep, walked between the rows of apprentices and stopped at any symbol that looked hurried or careless. When he found one, he made the student copy the entire passage from the beginning. Kha-em-waset's family had sacrificed a great deal to place him in the school at Thebes. His father was a sandal-maker. Scribes did not make sandals. Scribes had clean hands and sat in the shade and were addressed respectfully by everyone, including people richer than themselves. His father had told him this every morning for two years: 'You will not carry burdens. You will not dig. You will carry the pen, and the pen is lighter than any stone.' Amenhotep paused behind Kha-em-waset and studied his work. The silence lasted long enough to make the boy's neck tense. Then: 'The falcon's eye is acceptable. The water ripple needs work. Do it again.' He moved on without praise, because praise was not the master's function. The boy looked at his thousandth copy of the water ripple symbol and began again. Somewhere, in three or four years, there would be a title, a position, and a future that his father could not have imagined for himself.

1. The reading describes scribal training as beginning in childhood and requiring years of study. Based on both the case study and the reading's description of the scribe's social position, explain why a family like Kha-em-waset's would make significant sacrifices for this education. What were the realistic rewards?

2. The reading notes that literacy in ancient Egypt was limited to 1-3% of the population. How does this extreme rarity of literacy change the way you think about the power that scribes held in Egyptian society? Connect your answer to specific details from either the reading or the case study.

Multiple Choice

1. What role did Champollion's knowledge of Coptic play in deciphering hieroglyphics?

    a) Coptic was the language in which the Rosetta Stone's third inscription was written

    b) Coptic scribes had preserved a secret key to reading hieroglyphics in a monastery library that somehow survived

    c) Coptic descended from ancient Egyptian, allowing Champollion to recognize sounds recovered from hieroglyphics

    d) Coptic contained a translation of the Rosetta Stone that had never been published

2. What is a cartouche in Egyptian hieroglyphics?

    a) A non-pronounced symbol placed at the end of words to indicate their category

    b) A small clay tablet used for writing administrative records

    c) An oval ring that surrounded and identified royal names in inscriptions

    d) A phonetic symbol representing the sound associated with a particular object

3. Why was the Rosetta Stone such a crucial discovery for Egyptologists?

a) It had the same text in hieroglyphics, demotic, and readable ancient Greek, providing a translation key

b) It contained a list of all pharaohs and their reign dates

c) It was the only example of demotic script ever found in the Nile Delta

d) It proved that hieroglyphics was a purely pictographic writing system with no phonetic elements whatsoever

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Hieratic	A) The French scholar who deciphered hieroglyphics in 1822 using knowledge of Coptic
2. ___ Demotic	B) A non-pronounced symbol placed at the end of hieroglyphic words to indicate their category
3. ___ Logogram	C) A cursive script developed from hieroglyphics for everyday use, written with a brush on papyrus
4. ___ Determinative	D) A hieroglyphic symbol that represents an entire word or concept rather than a sound
5. ___ Champollion	E) A simplified script used for administrative and commercial purposes in later ancient Egypt

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The Rosetta Stone was carved in 196 BCE and contains a decree honoring Pharaoh _____, written in three scripts.

2. Jean-Francois Champollion announced his decipherment of hieroglyphics on September 14, _____, after comparing cartouches containing the names Ptolemy and Cleopatra.

3. The oval rings that surrounded royal names in hieroglyphic inscriptions are called _____.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Hieroglyphics was a 'mixed system' combining logograms, phonograms, and determinatives. Why might a mixed system like this be both more powerful and more difficult to learn than a purely alphabetic system?

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2. Egypt has requested the return of the Rosetta Stone from the British Museum, but the museum has declined. What arguments might Egypt make for its return, and what arguments might the British Museum make for keeping it?

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3. The decipherment of hieroglyphics gave historians access to texts written 3,000 to 4,000 years ago. Why is this kind of access important, and what kinds of information can written records provide that physical artifacts alone cannot?

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