

Basic Lessons in Hieratic

This series of lessons in reading Hieratic is written with the aim of helping those who wish to learn this style of Egyptian writing. While there are a number of books and other resources for learning the Hieroglyphic form of Egyptian writing, there practically nothing available for learning Hieratic. I hope that this will help to fill the gap a little.

I am not an expert at reading Hieratic, in fact I am just learning it myself. Creating these lessons is my way of being both teacher and student in teaching myself to read Hieratic. Hopefully they will succeed in this, and also in helping others to learn.

You will also need to install the Transliteration font on your computer, if it is not installed yet. You can download this [here for PC](#) or [here for Mac](#). You will have to restart your browser for the new font to be recognized.

These pages are best viewed with Netscape Navigator 3 or higher at a screen resolution of 800X600.

The automatic mailing forms used on the exercise pages don't appear to work properly with Internet Explorer. Those of you using Internet Explorer may have to send your comments or answers to the exercises the hard way with your e-mail program.

- Stephen Fryer
04/12/09

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[Introduction](#)



Introduction

Hieratic is the cursive form of Hieroglyphic writing which the Egyptians used for everyday writing. Hieratic developed very early in Egyptian history, and remained in use for most documents until around 700BCE when it was replaced by Demotic. However, Hieratic was still used for religious documents on papyrus until the old priesthood was disbanded.

Hieratic, as the practical form of writing, was the first type of writing that the Egyptian scribes learned. Hieroglyphics were only taught to advanced students. As a result, many scribes could not read Hieroglyphic inscriptions, or only with difficulty. This is, of course, exactly the opposite of what occurs now - Hieroglyphs first, then Hieratic for a select few. Hieratic texts are now usually transcribed into Hieroglyphs in order to be studied.



Hieratic signs correspond exactly to the Hieroglyphic signs which would be used to write the same text. The same rules of spelling and arrangement of signs applies to Hieratic as to Hieroglyphic.

Over the course of its history, Hieratic changed. A major change occurred around 1300BCE, resulting in "Ramesside" style writing. What we shall be looking at here will be "Middle Egyptian" style Hieratic, used in the Middle Kingdom and 18th Dynasty. Most of the Hieratic signs will be taken from Papyrus Leningrad 1115, the Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor, since the scribe who wrote it had nice, clear handwriting.

Hieratic was written from right to left. In the earlier part of the Middle Kingdom, it might be written either in columns or lines, however later it was only written in lines. The individual signs were drawn starting from the top left of the sign, which is easier for right-handed people.

Horizontal lines were generally drawn from left to right; verticals from top to bottom. [More Information](#)

I plan to create a series of lessons, each with exercises to practice reading Hieratic. At first the Hieratic will be rather artificial, but later I shall try to include as much actual Hieratic as possible. The exercises will also include places for you to type in your answers and any questions or comments and automatically have them sent by e-mail so you can be sure whether you're on the right track, or to ask for assistance if you are having difficulty with some part of a lesson.








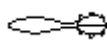



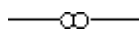







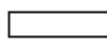













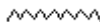



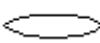

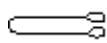



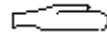
Before you begin these lessons, I recommend that you know at least the basics of reading the Hieroglyphic version of the writing, and that you have some knowledge of Middle Egyptian, the language which was written in this form of Hieratic. These lessons are intended to build on those skills.

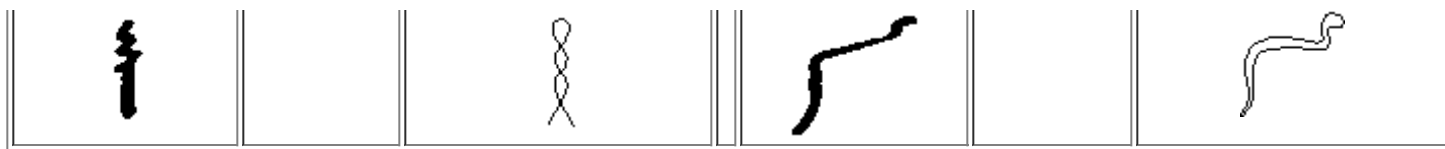
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[Lesson 1](#)




Lesson 1- "Alphabetic" Signs

As with Hieroglyphics, the best place to start is to learn the "alphabetic" signs - those signs representing a single consonant. Since most people using these lessons will probably already be familiar with Hieroglyphic writing, the following table gives correspondences between the Hieratic characters, and the equivalent Hieroglyphs (from which they are derived). Since Hieratic was written from right to left, the signs (both Hieratic and Hieroglyphic) are shown facing right as they would in actual texts.

Hieratic	Value	Hieroglyph	Hieratic	Value	Hieroglyph
	3			<i>h</i>	
	<i>i</i>			<i>h</i>	
	<i>c</i>			<i>s</i>	
	<i>w</i>			<i>s</i>	
	<i>b</i>			<i>š</i>	
	<i>p</i>			<i>k</i>	
	<i>f</i>			<i>k</i>	
	<i>m</i>			<i>g</i>	
	<i>n</i>			<i>t</i>	
	<i>r</i>			<i>t</i>	
	<i>h</i>			<i>d</i>	
	<i>h</i>			<i>d</i>	



The Hieratic form of  was originally , which you will notice corresponds with the other two bird signs  and , however this was gradually replaced by the sign given in the table above.

There was also a second form of  in Hieratic:  which was taken over into Hieroglyphic as .

Reading Hieratic does take practice of course, and most especially since some signs are rather easily confused. You can use [Exercise 1A](#) and [Exercise 1B](#) to help you become familiar with some of the signs.

For help with this lesson, you can send me [e-mail](#).




















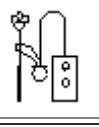









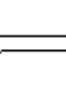












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Lesson 2- Common Determinatives


Since Hieratic is simply a cursive form of Hieroglyphic, it has the same types of signs. One of these with which you are no doubt familiar is determinatives. Most words in Egyptian are accompanied by one or more determinatives. In fact, picking out determinatives in a text is one way of finding where one word ends and the next begins. They are of course essential in many cases for us to know which of several words of different meaning that are otherwise spelled the same.


In this lesson a number of common and useful determinatives are presented. Some of these are also used as phonetic signs, so they will be your first signs representing more than one consonant. The phonetic values (if any) are indicated after the meaning as a determinative, in larger type.


Hieratic	Meaning	Hieroglyph	Hieratic	Meaning	Hieroglyph
	man, person			town, city	
	talk, eat			singular *	
	strike, force, effort			plural	
	praise, worship			abstract	
	walk, run			writing <i>sš</i>	
	small, weak evil			star <i>dw3</i>	
	wood			house, building <i>pr</i>	
	sky, heaven <i>pt</i>			god <i>ntr</i>	
	irrigated land			boat, ship	
	foreign country desert			sun, day, time	
	eye, see <i>ir</i>			ear, hearing <i>sdm</i>	

	woman			child	
				negative	

* This sign is used after another to indicate that the first sign is to be read as an ideogram, that is, as the object the sign is a picture of.

** When there is a need to fit this sign into a small space, it is reduced to .

*** When this sign is fitted into a small space, it is reduced to .

**** The dot on top of this sign was sometimes quite small, leading to confusion with  "n"

Reading Hieratic does take practice of course, and most especially since some signs are rather easily confused. You can use [Exercise 2A](#) and [Exercise 2B](#) to help you become familiar with some of the signs. Then you can try your hand at reading some simple sentences in [Exercise 2C](#).

For help with this lesson, you can send me [e-mail](#).

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Lesson 3- Common Bi- and Tri-Consonant Signs

Since Hieratic is simply a cursive form of Hieroglyphic, it has the same types of signs. Beside the signs representing a single consonant (the "Egyptian alphabet") and determinatives, there are many signs which represent several consonants. In this lesson a number of common bi- and tri-consonant signs are presented. There are of course **many** more!

You will notice that some of the signs are ones you saw in the last lesson as determinatives. There is no firm distinction between phonetic signs and determinatives - it depends entirely upon the context in which the signs are used.

As in the preceding lessons, you can use the Exercises ([3A](#), [3B](#), [3C](#)) to practice your ability to recognise these signs.

Hieratic	Value	Hieroglyph	Hieratic	Value	Hieroglyph
	<i>s3</i>			<i>km</i>	
	<i>m3</i>			<i>pr</i>	
	<i>nfr</i>			<i>nb</i>	
	<i>ph</i>			<i>htp</i>	
	<i>hn</i>			<i>sš</i>	
	<i>nw</i>			<i>dw3</i>	
	<i>gm</i>			<i>ḥ</i>	
	<i>pt</i>			<i>ntr</i>	
	<i>ii</i>			<i>mr</i>	
	<i>sw</i>			<i>hnt</i>	

	<i>ir</i>			<i>sdm</i>	
	<i>nh</i>			<i>d3</i>	
	<i>ini</i>			<i>mwt</i>	

Reading Hieratic does take practice of course, and most especially since some signs are rather easily confused. You can use [Exercise 3A](#) and [Exercise 3B](#) to help you become familiar with some of the signs. Then you can try your hand at reading some simple sentences in [Exercise 3C](#). In all of these exercises you can use the interactive form to automatically submit your answers and questions *via* e-mail if you want assistance or confirmation.

For help with this lesson, you can send me [e-mail](#).

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Lesson 4- Ligatures

Hieratic was written quickly with a brush. This resulted in a tendency to not lift the brush entirely between signs. Therefore the signs tend to be more or less connected. Some scribes tended to run signs together more than others, leading to variations in the writing even within the same period of history. This is very much like the case with our own cursive writing.

Since Hieratic signs were drawn generally from top left to bottom right, connections were generally from the bottom right of one sign to the top left of the sign below.

















When signs are joined together, we call this a *ligature*. We can distinguish two classes of ligature:











- A simple connection, which leaves the basic shapes of the connected signs the same
- A true ligature, where the shape one or more of the signs is considerably modified. The signs essentially are blended together to form a new, compound sign.

In this lesson we shall pay particular attention to the true ligatures. The simple connections are easier to recognize because the shapes of the individual signs are still quite recognizable. A number of the most common ligatures are given in the following table. You will notice that many of them involve the signs for *k*, *n*, *ʕ*, and *t*.

Most ligatures also involve only two signs, and this is especially the case in horizontal lines of text. Text written in columns tends to have more ligatures, and may have ligatures involving several signs.

As in the preceding lessons, you can use the Exercises ([4A](#), [4B](#)) to practice your ability to recognise these signs.

Hieratic	Value	Hieroglyph	Hieratic	Value	Hieroglyph
	ʕ- <i>k</i>			<i>n-k</i>	
	<i>r-k</i>			<i>r-h</i>	
	<i>n-t</i>			<i>Hw-t</i>	
	<i>d-t</i>			<i>n-t-t</i>	

	<i>p-t</i>			<i>m-t</i>	
	<i>n-f</i>			<i>m-r</i>	
	<i>d-d</i>				

Here is an example of a sentence written horizontally with a number of ligatures, which should give you a little idea of the sort of thing you can expect to see.



Reading Hieratic does take practice of course, and most especially since some signs are rather easily confused. You can use [Exercise 4A](#) to help you become familiar with some of the signs. Then you can try your hand at reading some simple sentences in [Exercise 4B](#). In all of these exercises you can use the interactive form to automatically submit your answers and questions *via* e-mail if you want assistance or confirmation.

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