

Reading the Rosetta Stone: Introduction to Ptolemaic Hieroglyphs

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1 1/26/2026

- most signs in “Ptolemaic” hieroglyphs reflect standard, conventional use, as reflected in e.g. Gardiner’s sign list
 - example from temple text: the one unusual sign is a dog [jackal?] signifying the phonetic value *ii*
 - Ptolemaic has “7000” signs, but in practice, most texts rely predominantly on the “700” or so standard signs that most students will know
 - Leitz on a ritual scene from the temple of Dendara: 362 signs, 342 of which are conventional, 10 are common Late Egyptian substitute unilaterals
- Ptolemaic inscriptions often juxtapose playful or unusual writings against more standard writings

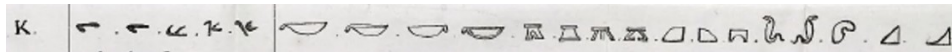


hw̄i.n=f ḥ³=sn m inb pn r ifd nn iry m ifd

He made protection around them with this wall on the four sides of these [gods].

- standing baboon with arms raised: an unusual but common Ptolemaic writing of *nfr*
- **TempleTexte:** <https://www.templetexte.uni-tuebingen.de/portal/>
- [*The Temple of Esna: An Evolving Translation*, by David Klotz: <https://bookdown.org/shemanefer/Esna3/>]
- “Ptolemaic” can be a misleading term. Ptolemaic hieroglyphs do not only appear in Ptolemaic or Roman inscriptions. Conversely, not all such inscriptions stick to “Ptolemaic” readings/values of given hieroglyphs, but may use older readings/values.
- *P3-di-Imn-nb-ns.t-t3.wy*: In his copy of the Book of the Dead, his name uses the Ptolemaic obelisk sign for the name Amun
- *m-hnw* evolves phonetically to sound like *mw hr nw*, which is then spelled: *m(w) hr nw*
- *pri* spelled with an *f* viper leaving a box(!); *k* spelled with the viper entering the box
- the principles by which Ptolemaic glyphs derive their values were not new to the Ptolemaic Period, but (expansions of) older, existing principles

- Traditional Egyptian: “From 404 BCE [to] 394 CE hieroglyphic texts were in general composed in the high-status language variety termed Traditional Egyptian.” <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8g73w3gp>
 - inconsistent *n* vs *m* distinction
 - inconsistent *sdm=f* vs *sdm.n=f*
 - reduction of statives, infinitives, affixes
 - phonetic changes reflected in script
 - imitation of earlier phases
 - text-specific idiosyncrasies
 - attested from the New Kingdom through Roman Periods
 - “linguistic interference” from all stages of the language
- Joachim Quack doesn’t believe that Ptolemaic hieroglyphs exist as a true separate category: There is no phase of the language that can be definitively called Ptolemaic.
- the following glyphs all signified phonetic k in what Champollion read:



- Leitz: “[Ptolemaic] is not some arcane branch”!
- hieroglyph theory:
 - a literal description of the *ba* bird as depicted in the *b3* sign
 - Dendera VI, 157, 2: “As for Sobek who is in this place, it is Seth. As for the feather which is upon his head, it is Osiris.” Then a glyph of a literal crocodile wearing a *maat* feather
- BD 17: “I know the name of this Medjed, who is among those inside of the temple of Osiris, who shoots with his eye, but one cannot see him; who circles heaven with flames of his mouth, who announces the flood, but one cannot see him.”
- our main sign list:

Kurth, *A Ptolemaic A Ptolemaic Sign-List. Hieroglyphs used in the Temples of the Graeco-Roman Period of Egypt and their Meanings*

- our main dictionary/lexicon:

Wilson, *A Ptolemaic Lexikon: a Lexicographical Study of the Texts in the Temple of Edfu (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta)*

- derivation principles:
 - acrophony [think: “acronyms”]: we will mainly avoid this
 - the consonantal principle: drop weak sounds in multilaterals
 - phonetic shifts: *p* vs *b*, *m* to *b*, *m* vs *n*, *d* vs *t*, *k* vs *k*
 - class (*f* vs *d* snakes) and shape (*h* vs *r*^c signs) substitutions, synonymy
 - direct representation (viper leaving/entering box; feather-wearing crocodile; “colorful of feathers, who comes forth from the horizon”)
 - antonomasia (*ntr* ʕ < epithet of Ihy < sistrum player, *ikr* < epithet of Thoth < ibis), metonymy (*ny-sw.t* < King of Upper Egypt < white crown; *ntr* < god < star [compare: Sumerian *dingir* sign])
 - synecdoche
 - logograms, the rebus principle

- puns
- ??? (*t3.wy* < two lands < scarab?)

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- example derivations of “new” readings:
 - *m3Ꞁ.(t)-ḥrw* < “wreath of justification” < Gardiner M2
 - *ʿImn* < *n m iw* (Gaudard 2010), *i m n* (Sethe 1993), *im + n* (Fairman 1943)
 - *dd*, e.g., in the name *Dd-ḥr* < *dd mdw.(t)* < *Dḥwty?*
- quasi-phonetic spellings of royal names:
 - *Ptwlmys* < Ptolemy
 - *Ḳliwp3dr3* < Cleopatra
 - *K3ysrs* < Caesar
- use of the dual was fairly limited: e.g., to pairs of gods, pairs of body parts
- like in Late Egyptian (LE):
 - the feminine *-t* was no longer pronounced in the spoken language, so it was often dropped in the script
 - no gender/number agreement needed in the indirect genitive
 - definite articles *p3, t3, n3*
 - adverbial predicates are tenseless by default, with tense marked by converters
- *iwꞀ n ntr.wy pri.wy* < “heir of the manifest gods” < heir of Πτολεμαῖος Ἐπιφανῆς Εὐχάριστος < heir of *Ptolemaïos Epiphanês Eukháristos* < heir of Ptolemy V the Manifest, the Beneficent < Ptolemy VIII
- “Ptolemy VIII was a super-not-great dude... It was very Game-of-Thrones in this time period”
- *B3k.t*, “The Shining One”, is an epithet (not replacement) for *Km.t*, much like “a shining city on a hill” for Puritan Massachusetts
- If you memorize the cult epithets of the various Ptolemies, it can help with identifying these kings in Egyptian texts where they are named only by epithet.
- *šhm Ꞁnh ʿImn*, “living image of Amun”, is a Ptolemaic evocation of the New Kingdom *Tw.t-Ꞁnh-ʿImn* (!)
- the *nty* in *ꞀhꞀy nty Ꞁ3.t rwd.(t)*: maybe a precursor of the Coptic indefinite *nt-*prefix
- updates to the suffix pronouns:
 - *-tw* established as the impersonal 3rd person singular pronoun
 - *-w* now used as 3rd person plural pronoun
- Zoom chat: “what does *imps* mean?” “impersonal”
- in the spelling of *hy*, “male, husband”: a penis
- *is*, derived from *ist/ist*, marks the start of an independent clause, usually an adverbial predicate
- Some people claim that there are no Egyptian creation myths with creator goddesses. “I’m here to tell you, that’s bunk!”
- the particle *iw* can take different, contradictory roles:
 - when used as in the Middle Egyptian (ME) *iw* for (circumstantial) adverbial predicates, it is a circumstantial converter marking an independent clause
 - when used as in LE, it marks a dependent clause
- *wnn.in*: imperfect converter used in narrative contexts

- *wn*: imperfect converter used in non-narrative contexts
- Esna 206: a Neith creation myth documented on a single column of the temple of Esna

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- How to identify when *iw* is marking the circumstantial first present? Sometimes, can tell from whether the surrounding text has more ME or more LE characteristics.
- adverbial predicates can often occur with no introductory particle
- cartouches:
 - the Greek cult epithet usually appears outside, not inside, cartouches
 - within the birth-name cartouche of a Ptolemy, the name is often followed by the epithets *ʿnh d.t mry Pth*
 - within the throne-name cartouche, the name is often followed by *sh̄m ʿnh ʿImn*
 - nearby the name of the ruler, one often finds epithets for the parent(s) of the ruler
- example use of epithets from the Rosetta Stone:



hnty n ny-sw.t bity Ptlmys ʿnh d.t mry Pth ntr pri nb nfr.w

statue of the king of upper and lower Egypt, Ptolemy, living forever, beloved of Ptah, the manifest god, lord of perfection

- [Kom Ombo: site of a Ptolemaic temple dedicated “dually” to Sobek and Haroeris (*Hr-wr*)]
- an oddity: they switch between *Sbk* and *Sbk-R* even in the same (columnar) text
- Aurelio: Would *kairos* (καῖρος) be an appropriate translation of *ʿ3.t*?
- In the Getty and other places, they refer to Trajan as “Augustus Caesar”: but if you look at the actual cartouches, it’s Trajan with the *title* Autocrator Caesar
- last line of the Rosetta Stone:

[h̄ti=tw] sh̄3wy pn hr ʿh̄y nty ʿ3.t rwd.(t) m s̄s n mdw.w-ntr

This decree should be engraved upon a stela of hard stone in hieroglyphs [“the writing of the gods’ words”].

- apart from the Rosetta Stone, most of the texts we’re reading in class are from temple walls, and occur as description of a (theological) scene
- common structure of a temple scene: the king gives an offering to a god; the god then promises some benefit to the king
- The Ptolemaic spellings of the 3rd-person masculine and feminine dependent pronouns often overlap: Why? Because by that point in time, *sw* and *sy* were being pronounced the same.

- infrequently, they use the LE dependent pronouns in place of the ME ones: $tw=i, tw=k, tw=t, tw=n, tw=tn$ in place of wi, tw, tn, n, tn
- Why is hpr spelled without the complementary r ? Because by that point in time, they were not pronouncing the r : They pronounced it *shope* [as in Coptic].

4. 2/16/26

- “When you see those winged [sun] disks everywhere in temples in Egypt, those are depictions of Horus of Edfu.”
- Monumental inscription sight-reading practice:



snd n šbk-R^c nb Nby.t ntr ʕ3 nb ḥw.t ḥnt

Have fear of Sobek-Re, lord of Ombos, great god, lord of the temple of the south.



*mi n ḥrw=i it=i Wsir
 ink s3=k ḥr m3^c ḥrw
 Wsir Wn-nfr m3^c ḥrw ntr ʕ3 ḥry ib Twn.t
 ḥtp ḥr=k nfr n ny-sw.t bity nb t3.wy ()*

Come to my voice, my father, Osiris.
 I am your son, Horus, true of voice.
 Osiris Wenfer [“Perfect Being”], true of voice, great god who is in Dendera.
 May your beautiful face be content with the dual king, the lord of the two lands, ().

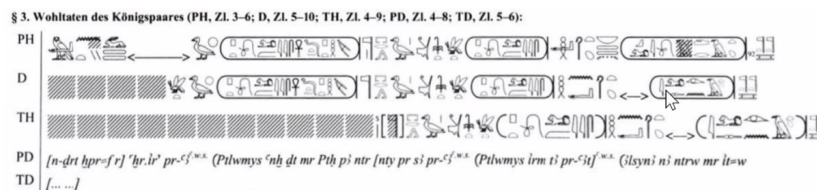
- LE $sdm=f$ forms:
 - perfective $sdm=f$: a.k.a, preterite, perfect
 - prospective $sdm=f$: a.k.a., subjunctive

- ambiguity in the phrase *iw^c n ntr.wy pri.wy*: could be either Ptolemy VI or Ptolemy VIII, since they were brothers
- exercise: find *iw^c n ntr.wy pri.wy* in Urk. VIII, no. 76
- “The left eye will be joining the right eye”
- real example where the feminine 3rd-person dependent pronoun is spelled with *-w*, because the (semi)vowel is just not pronounced anymore:

sw m hm.t n Imn-R^c

She [not “he”] is the wife of Amun-Re.

- “They were supposed to write his mother’s name, but accidentally wrote his first wife’s name: Cleopatra [the First].” “They should all have been named Arsinoe.” “Right. Or Berenike... We have, what, seven Cleopatras...”



- very common in monumental captions:

dd mdw.(w) in [name of god]

speaking [infinitive] of word[s] by [name of god]

- in reference books: “Tableau” = an illustrated scene; “Titre et Formule” = the title caption
- *tw3 p.t* = “raising the sky [said of the king-as-Shu]”
- *mi n=k / n=t* = “take for yourself”
- the *hr / r* + infinitive construction:
 - in Ptolemaic writing [or LE], *hr* + ___ need not have progressive aspect
 - may be modified by preceding converters
 - may omit the *hr* or *r*, as they were no longer included in the spoken version
- in Ptolemaic, *iw=i*, *iw=k*, *iw=t*, etc. will just refer to the LE third future
- Coptic ⲙⲁ ⲟⲩⲧⲙ comes from Egyptian *hr sdm*, not *hr sdm*
- “Remember, if you’re Egyptian, you’re facing south. So ‘the West’ is to the right.”
- “[In the West], you could get attacked by Apophis; you have the damned who get their heads cut off every night...Of course, in the Christian era, the West is recast as the bad pagan place.”

5. 2/23/26

- And why is Horus of Edfu portrayed as a winged disk? The following excerpt from the Legend of the Winged Disk, using the imperfect converter *wn.in* and spelling *ꜥpy*, “winged disk”, with a literal winged disk:

- emphatic construction
- Recall two ways to translate the emphatic construction:

sdm.n=f n pr

cleft sentence It is in the house that he heard.

fronting That he heard, [was] in the house.

- Examples of Wechselsatz:

iri.n=s ḥpr=s m id.t whm.n=s irw=s m ḥ3

As she made her form as a cow, so she repeated [“her making”] as a Nile perch. (Esna 206, 1)

w3ḥ.n=s t3 m ḥr-ib Nwn iri.n=s rn=f m k3 k3

As she set land within [“in the heart of”] Nun, so she made its name as High Mound. (Esna 206, 4)

m3.n=f sbi.w m ḥr.t sni.n=f m ḥr=sn m ḥpy wr

As he saw the rebels from the sky, so he passed over them [“in upon them”] as the great winged disk. (Edfu VI, 112)

- other names for the stative: qualitative, old perfective, pseudoparticiple, resultative
- Main difficulty in identifying the stative in LE, hence in Ptolemaic: three paradigms for spelling:
 - Paradigm 1: ME endings

<i>-k(wi)</i>	<i>-(w)n</i>
<i>-tw / -ti</i>	<i>-tn</i>
[null] (m.), <i>-tw / -ti</i> (f.)	[null], <i>-y</i>

- Paradigm 2: uniform ending *-tw / -ti*
- Paradigm 3: uniform null ending

6. 3/2/26

- proposal by Brose[?] that in the Esna creation myth, *sdm=f* is used to mark primeval time, *sdm.n=f* to mark general past tense, etc.
- consensus after Polotsky:
 - that there is an emphatic construction to emphasize adverbials
 - that there are Wechselsätzen
 - that the second-tense converters in LE and Coptic are related
 - that the systematic distribution of *iw mri=f* vs. [null] *mrr=f* is meaningful
 - that the systematic distribution of *iw=f ii.w* vs. *iw.n=f* is meaningful
- disagreement after Polotsky:

...a legal unilateral deed for donating property. As a living will, it was made and perhaps executed while the husband was still alive. In this will, the husband would assign to his wife what he wished of his own private property, i.e., what he acquired before his marriage. An example of this is the *imyt-pr* of Wah from el-Lahun. 2) If there were no children, and the husband did not wish his brothers and sisters to receive two-thirds of the community property, he could legally adopt his wife as his child and heir and bequeath all the property to her. Even if he had other children, he could still adopt his wife, so that, as his one of his legal offspring, she would receive some of the two-thirds share, in addition to her normal one-third share of the community property.]

- The independent pronouns:

<i>ink</i>	<i>inn</i>
<i>ntk</i> (m.) / <i>ntt</i> (f.)	<i>nttn</i>
<i>ntf</i> (m.) / <i>nts</i> (f.)	<i>ntsn</i>

- nominal predicate example:

imn.t=f pw itn
i3b.t=f pw i3h
b3=f pw šw

The sun disk is his right eye.
 The moon is his left eye.
 The sunlight is his *ba*.

7. 3/9/26

- The subduing of the rebels by Horus of Edfu, from the Legend of the Winged Disk:

TABLEAU No. 2 d. VI⁽¹⁾ (pl. CXLVIII).



- the most common epithet of Isis: *Wr.t Wsr.t*, “the Great, the Powerful”
- often used in medical texts, and also on the Rosetta Stone [see also: TLA 851592 <https://tla.digital/lemma/851592>]:

nfr.wy s m šsr-m3^c

How truly perfect it is!

- *Sn3.t* = Esna; *S3w t3 m hr-ib Nwn* = Sais, the land within Nun
- More theological place names:

bḥdty Ndm-^cnḥ

ḏd.tw Ndm-^cnḥ n t3 ^ch.t n hr bḥdty hr=s (r) mn hrw pn

It is the sweet-of-life.

One has said “Sweet-of-Life” for the palace of Horus of Edfu because of it [“upon it”] to this day.

db3 ḥfty.w=i pw

ḏd.tw Db3 r sp3.t tn r mn hrw pn

It is the destruction of my enemies.

One has said “Destruction” to this district to this day.

- *smsw wr n it=(f)* = “the eldest of [his] father [firstborn]”

8. 3/16/26

- Isis: the one for whom eternity stretches out:

*wn ny-sw.t bity nb t3.wy Wsr-K3-R^c mri Imn hr dw3 mw.t=f 3s.t wr.t wsr.t
mi.t r ^ch.t s-^cnḥ.(t) ntr.w rmt.w dwn.t ḥḥ n K3=t*

The king of Upper and Lower Egypt, lord of the two lands, Userkare, beloved of Amun, was worshipping his mother, Isis, the great one, the powerful one. Come to your palace, one who causes-to-live gods and men, [for whom] eternity stretches out for her spirit.

- Astarte is ^c*strd*:

šmi.t pw iri.n ḥm n R^c

^cstrd ḥn^c=f m3.n=f sbi.w hr.(w) hr t3

The majesty of Re went [“A going was what the majesty of Re did”]. Astarte was with him, [when] he saw the rebels fallen on the ground.

- nominal predicates:

mk.t=f mk.t nn ntr.w ts phr

ntf sk rmt n ntf sk 3ḥ

His protection is the protection of these gods, and vice versa.

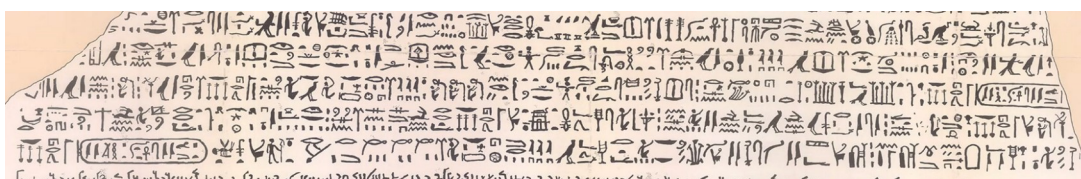
- “People still read the word for regnal year as *h3t-sp*. This is a misreading of the Ptolemaic signs: it should be *hsb.t*, “the reckoning.”
- use of *wnn.in* to convert an adverbial predicate to the literary past tense:



*hsb.t 363 n ny-sw.t bity R^c-hr-3hty ^cnh.(w) d.t r nh^h
 wnn.in ir=f hm=f m T3-Sti
 mš^c=f hn^c=f n(n) tnw=sn [wn.(w)] r w3w r nb=sn
 dd.tw n=f T3-[W3w3].t r mn hrw pn*

Regnal year 363 of the king of Upper and Lower Egypt, Rehorakhty, living forever to eternity.
 Then his majesty was in the Land of the Bow.
 His troops were with him, without number, [while] they [were] about to plot against their lord.
 One says to it “Land-of-Rebellion” to this day.

- “Fairman wrote a whole book called *The Triumph of Horus* [<https://archive.org/details/triumphofhorusan0000unse/page/n5/mode/2up>], explaining how to reconstruct the stage dramas for this cycle of myths around Horus and Set.” [<https://www.attalus.org/egypt/drama.html>]
- conjunctive: *mtw* + subject + infinitive = “and [subject] [verb with same tense and aspect as in preceding clause]”
- the Rosetta Stone:
 - uncovered by Napoleon’s soldiers while they were renovating Fort Julien at [modern-day] Rashid
 - scholars quickly recognized the Greek, and in particular, the ending:



*[hti=tw] sh3w pn hr ^ch^cy nty ^c3.t rwd.(t) m sš.w n mdw.w-ntr sš.w n š^cy sh3y
 n h3.w-nb.(w)
 (r) rdi.(t) ^ch^c=f m gs.w-pr.w m r3.w-pr.(w) nb.(w) hr rn=f m mh-1 mh-2
 mh-3
 r-gs hnty n ny-sw.t bity Ptwlmys ^cnh.(w) d.t mri Pth ntr pri nb nfr.w*

...This [decree] [should be engraved] on a stele of hard stone in the script of the god’s words, the script of letters, and the script of the Greeks, to have it stand in the temples, in all the sanctuaries with his name, of the

first, second, and third (rank),
next to the statue of the king of Upper and Lower Egypt, Ptolemy, ever
living, whom Ptah loves, the manifest god, lord of perfection.

- the actual decree on the stela:
 - issued after a revolt in the Delta following Ptolemy V's coronation as a teenager
 - offered financial support for temples, increased priestly stipends, reduced taxes, amnesty for prisoners
 - stipulated royal cult in temples, with monthly celebrations of the king's birthday and accession day
- Actual decree is part of a long line of "sacerdotal decrees":
 - Mendes 264 BCE
 - Alexandria 243
 - Canopus 238
 - Raphia 217
 - Memphis 196
 - Philae 186
 - Nobaireh 182
- The sacerdotal decrees were largely the same, but still had differences. E.g., Canopus 238 BCE decreed the creation of a fifth division of priests. Raphia 217 and later decrees were concerned with putting down rebellions, partly resulting from a decision to allow Egyptians to serve in the Ptolemaic army.
- "Why did they write *sh3y* instead of *sš.w* for 'the script of the Greeks'?' Was it to signal that the Greeks wrote in an alphabetic script [not like theirs]?"
- The hypothetical reconstruction of the whole stela:

