



# Preface

*"Men for many centuries before lived without town or laws, speaking one tongue under the rule of Jove. But after Mercury had explained the languages of men (when he is called ermeneutes, "interpreter," for Mercury in Greek is called Hermes; he too, divided the nations), then discord arose among mortals, which was not pleasing to Jove."*

Fabulae 143, Phoroneus by Hyginus, translated by Mary Grant

If we had to identify the writing system of a modern language akin to the Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs it would be Chinese. In fact, Chinese and ancient Egyptian share a special feature: They are both closer to actual speech than other later languages. Not phonetically, but in their desire to represent reality in written form. In other words, by *depicting* the things that people spoke about. This said, let us recall a Chinese story briefly, as it bears on our study:

One day, a group of people in a small Chinese village went to the police station. They made a formal request to change their family name. The officials were taken aback. In China, family names go back generations, and families are usually keen on preserving them. First, the police thought the reason was that someone in the family was a criminal. Then, the family revealed that their name was 苟<sup>a</sup> (Gǒu<sup>b</sup>). This word means "careless," or "negligent," and the written character does not have a negative connotation. But another word, 狗 (gǒu) "dog," is pronounced exactly the same way, and it just happens to be one of the curse words in Chinese.

They also told the police that an old man of the 苟 family remembered that the family's original name was not 苟, but 敬 (Jìng). The two names have the character 苟 in common, and differ only by the "side radical" 文.

The police asked for evidence. The family found a local historian. After some research, he found out that there lived an emperor between 907 and 960 CE, whose name was 石敬瑭 (Shí Jìngtáng). The

---

<sup>a</sup> Unless stated otherwise we use simplified (mainland) Chinese characters.

<sup>b</sup> The pinyin Romanization system is used.

















middle character 敬 was the same as the old family name. The reason for the name change was that in China, one cannot bear the same name as the emperor. When this emperor came to power, he decreed that everyone who has the 敬 name must change it. The two characters, 敬 and 苟 are very similar, so the 敬 families changed their name to 苟. This seemed an innocent choice, as a thousand years ago, “dog” was 犬 (quǎn), and 苟 did not have a negative connotation.

Due to evidence the family produced, the police allowed it to change its name. When this was reported in a newspaper, the police all over China got requests from 苟 families who now wanted to change their name.

There was a 15-year old girl named 苟 who was so inspired by her name change that she said she was going to become a doctor. But when she did become a doctor, all the patients knew her real name was 苟. She became known as the 狗医生 (gǒu yīshēng) “dog doctor.”


What did we learn from this story? First, in ancient China an ordinary citizen could not bear the same name as the emperor (which is the source of all the problems in the story). This custom, more like an imperial decree, is alien to ancient Egypt. Officials of the court and scribes could be called “Amenemhat” during the reign of any of the pharaohs with the same name. An official was even named after “Horus,” one of the principal gods of the Egyptian pantheon!<sup>°</sup> Second, signs can have similar spellings, but different pronunciation and meaning. Comparing the identically sounded characters 狗 and 苟 one can see that they are composed of a common part and an additional sign. The common part is called the “phonetic,” and the extra sign is the “radical.” The phonetic tells how the sign is pronounced, and the radical usually (but not always) points to, or gives a clue for, the meaning of the word.





Examining the oldest artifacts of ancient Egypt<sup>d</sup> (and also in China), it is clear that the Egyptian writing system originally heavily relied on ideograms; pictographic signs that convey their meaning through what they depict. Some of them have a clear and transparent meaning:  “man;”  “woman;”  “people” (mounted on the so-called plural strokes);  “face;”  “head;”  “hair;”  “movement;”  “sky;”  “sun;”  “land” (with three pieces of sand on the bottom);  “door-leaf;” and  “boat.” Some of them are more subtle:  “badness,” or “evil.” But as the Egyptian society became increasingly complex, ideograms - even their many, sometimes ingenious, combinations such as  “chief” (lit. “he who is on the top”) - failed to satisfy the demand for refinement. Due to the need for increasing clarity, more and more signs were prefixed to the old ideograms. What these new signs depicted no

<sup>°</sup> See the stela of the treasurer Heru, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia. Actually, the name Amenemhat also involves a god, lit. “Amun in Front.”





<sup>d</sup> See, for example, the analysis of artifacts in Chapters I.A-II.A.



longer mattered. What mattered was how they sounded when the word that they composed was uttered. Therefore, these signs were no longer ideograms, but sound signs, so-called phonograms, used only for their sound values. For example, “sun” was written in a more complex fashion as  <sup>e</sup>, pronounced as “re”<sup>f</sup>, since, in Egyptian, “mouth” was pronounced as *r*, and “arm” as *ʕ*. “Mouth” and “arm” had nothing to do with the celestial object, they only lent their sound to the pronunciation of the word *rʕ*. Thus, the rebus principle, one of the greatest discoveries of mankind, came into existence.<sup>g</sup> Other sound signs could be piled up in front of the sun ideogram to compose another word, and to obtain a different meaning.

For example,  *hrw* did not mean “sun” but “day.” (This word is pronounced by the Egyptologists’ agreement as “hero.”) Once again, the courtyard  *h*; the mouth  *r*; and the quail chick  *w* (for unknown reason); all lend their phonetic values to the pronunciation of the word *hrw*. Due to the sun’s daily cycle, this word is still related to the sun - even though it is not the celestial orb itself. Therefore, the sun symbol at the end became a sense sign, a so called determinative. It is a silent symbol that determines the sense, the semantic sphere, of the word that it was affixed to.

The ancient Egyptians thus solved the problems that the Chinese faced somewhat differently. Instead of inventing the combined phonetic + radical signs, always filling an allotted square with stylized strokes neatly, they came up with the phonogram + determinative combination. In this combination, the first part, the phonogram, was comprised of small indecomposable units; so-called phonemes. They determine the sound of the word. The second part, the determinative, was one or several signs with no phonetic values, but determining the semantic sphere of the word.

This system (just like the Chinese) had an added benefit. Insisting on shortness, the roughly 17,000 Egyptian words had many coincidences; many words, with different meanings, looked exactly the same in writing.<sup>h</sup> So conversely, it was the determinatives that came to differentiate among these words. For example,  “exist” (with no determinative) is part of the words  “open;”  “hur-ry;” and  “fault” or “blame.” They are transliterated the same way: *wn* (pronounced by Egyptologists as “wen”), but their meanings are different, as specified by the determinatives.

<sup>e</sup> Similar (in principle) to the Chinese pinyin Romanization system, Egyptologists designed a system of transliteration of the Egyptian signs, associating to each sign a letter, with some diacritical points or marks.




<sup>f</sup> Known from Coptic.

<sup>g</sup> Around the end of the Predynastic Period (ca. 3100 BCE).

<sup>h</sup> They were doubtless differentiated in spoken language. Just like Old Arabic, the ancient Egyptian writing system was skeletal in that only the consonants were indicated; thus giving only partial information how an actual word was pronounced.



In both Chinese and Egyptian there are many radicals/determinatives. A Chinese dictionary lists 190-230 radicals (with the discrepancy due to different interpretations of the combinations), and Egyptian has about 108 generic determinatives.

Which signs are ideograms, which have phonetic values, and which are determinatives? In fact, many signs can play multiple roles. This is one of the first difficulties that any student of Egyptian grammar faces. For example, in the first lesson, every student learns that the uniliteral phonogram (one-consonantal sign)  the “horned viper” has the phonetic value *f*. Only later, it turns out that this sign is also the determinative in the word  *jty* “father.” In addition, it is actually an ideogram for Upper-Egypt’s 12<sup>th</sup> nome<sup>i</sup>  *dw-ft*, the so-called “mountain of the horned viper.”

Twelve years of teaching Middle Egyptian at Rutgers University convinced the author that the most profitable and rewarding way to draw the students’ interests to this subject is to bring to the instruction as many literary works and as soon as possible. This is especially important in the study of the Middle Egyptian verbal structure - the most complex part of the language. For example, accurate translation of the six *s<sub>dm</sub>.f* verb forms not only requires the understanding of the particular sentence that they appear in, but also the understanding the context they are imbedded in.

This book is not a comprehensive treatise on Middle Egyptian grammar. Rare and elusive constructions will not be treated – even though they represent great value for grammarians. In addition, it is beyond the scope of this book to give even a rudimentary account on the current theories and debates on the Middle Egyptian verbal system. Emphasis, however, will be placed on *function* as opposed to *form*. For example, a verbal predicate in a sentence can have adverbial or nominal *function* without being inherently an adverbial or a nominal *form*. The existence of the several distinct verb forms of the suffix conjugation means that they have different *semantics* rather than different *syntactic* functions. These are hallmarks of the Nonstandard Theory. The reader wishing to have a thorough and comprehensive introduction to this should refer to James P. Allen’s “*Middle Egyptian, An Introduction to the Language and Culture of Hieroglyphs.*”<sup>j</sup>

The main goal of this book is, therefore, to learn Middle Egyptian through examples and in context. This path may seem tedious, but eventually most rewarding. The task of learning the seemingly endless stream of hieroglyphic signs is one of the initial hurdles for a student of Middle Egyptian. In the first chapter, we will introduce about a hundred of them in a step-by-step manner, and with a glimpse to their evolution. As we gradually develop our skills, we bring in more signs on many artifacts from museums

---

<sup>i</sup> Administrative district.

<sup>j</sup> For the works cited, see the “Bibliography and Abbreviations” at the end of this book.



around the world. In particular, each chapter ends with the analysis of a carefully chosen text from a variety of genres from artifacts, stelae, papyri, and monuments.

Gradual development also means a step-by-step approach in learning grammatically complex constructions. Our approach is to get acquainted with these through excerpts from literary texts, with an initial glimpse of the grammar, and with the thorough study deferred to later chapters. For example, in Chapter V.2 we will introduce participles and relative forms, but their comprehensive treatment will only be done in Chapters IX-X. Similarly, we will meet the subject + stative construction in a ferry-boat spell of the Coffin Texts at the end of Chapter V, but, once again, a thorough study of the stative verb form will only be given in Chapter XI.

The reader is given enough guidance in grammar, so that he or she will be able to arrive at his or her own translation of Middle Egyptian texts. At difficult passages we will not only explain the grammar points, but will also point out, and discuss the often conflicting views of grammarians. Translations by well-known Egyptologists are widely available in books and through the Internet. Among these M. Lichtheim's three-volume *"Ancient Egyptian Literature,"* and W. K. Simpson's *"Literature of Ancient Egypt"* are standard references throughout this book.

To show the universality of the ideas and mindset of the Egyptians, the texts are accompanied by various quotes from classical pieces of literature.

Beyond Allen's book noted above, the standard references for Egyptian grammar used in this book are: A. H. Gardiner's monumental *"Egyptian Grammar;"* and, for the Standard Theory, J. E. Hoch's *"Middle Egyptian Grammar."* The author taught from these with varying success. In addition, one should make note of the recent 2-volume treatise of the Middle Egyptian grammar (somewhat modified Standard Theory): J. F. Borghouts, *"Egyptian: An Introduction to the Writing and Language of the Middle Kingdom."*

In keeping this manuscript to a manageable size, there is no dictionary attached at the end of this book. In addition to R. O. Faulkner's excellent *"Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian,"* there is also an online dictionary<sup>k</sup> which allows quick searches. For deeper analysis, the seven-volume *"Wörterbuch"* of A. Erman and H. Grapow is an indispensable tool.



Exercises, further reading material, translations of many texts on papyri and stelae can also be found in the author's web site: <http://egypt-grammar.rutgers.edu>.

To match transliteration and translation, we display the texts in horizontal lines, written from left to right. Reflecting the Egyptian grammatical constructions and sacrificing eloquence, the translations given in the text closely follow the original meanings.

---

<sup>k</sup> [http://www.ancient-egypt.co.uk/transliteration/ancient\\_egypt\\_dictionary.pdf](http://www.ancient-egypt.co.uk/transliteration/ancient_egypt_dictionary.pdf)



We will give full (European) transliteration of the texts; that is, signs that are missing from specific spellings will be written out. Variant spellings that appear in the texts will be mentioned. For example, a variant spelling of Kush  *kš* (northern Sudan) appears in the Second Stela of Kamose as  *kšj*.

The typesetting of the hieroglyphic signs uses Serge Rosmorduc's JSesh software; downloadable from the Internet.<sup>1</sup> In some extreme cases, editing of complex or rare signs was necessary to be close to the original.

In this book hundreds of examples are brought up, analyzed, and compared - even though they may come from different phases of the long history of the Middle Egyptian language. The author sincerely hopes that, despite this anachronism, at the end, a coherent picture of Middle Egyptian will emerge.

Finally, it is the author's pleasure to record his thanks to Steven Darian, professor emeritus of linguistics at Rutgers University, and editor of Linus Books, for his enthusiasm in this project, and for his many suggestions to improve the clarity of the presentation. In addition, the author is greatly indebted to two of his former students of Middle Egyptian: Michael McClain, a graduate of classical studies, and Carole Wood, a law scholar with love for Egypt, for their careful reading of the manuscript. They spent countless hours checking every word, transliteration, spelling, and grammatical analysis. Michael supplied many quotes from classical literature, and Carole suggested literally hundreds of improvements of the original text. In addition to hard work they were also joyful companions to many memorable trips to Egypt.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://jsesh.qenherkhopeshef.org/en/download>.