



# Guide to the Writing Systems of Ancient Egypt

Stéphane Polis (ed.)

**Guide  
to the Writing Systems  
of Ancient Egypt**

In the same series:

Guillemette Andreu Lanoë, Dominique Valbelle, *Guide to Deir el-Medina*, 2023.

**Note to the reader:**

The essays in the present volume have been translated by Colin Clement, with the exception of nos. 6, 8, 15, 27–34, 36, 41–42, 49, which were originally written in English.

**Photographs of the cover:**

Cover: Tomb of Horemheb. © Dimitri Laboury / ULiège.

Back cover: Coptic papyrus (lettre P. Louvre R77/RE24; ca. 680 AD.

© 2009 Musée du Louvre/Georges Poncet).

Rabat: TT 82. © Alexis Den Doncker.

Graphical Charter: Fatiha Bouzidi

Adaptation and layout: Philippe Brulin

Cover layout: Philippe Brulin

© INSTITUT FRANÇAIS D'ARCHÉOLOGIE ORIENTALE, CAIRO, 2023

ISBN 978-2-7247-0873-8

Stéphane Polis (ed.)

# Guide to the Writing Systems of Ancient Egypt

Translation into English  
Colin Clement



LES GUIDES  
DE L'IFAO





# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>FOREWORD</b>	<b>8</b>
Laurent Coulon	
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>10</b>
The Languages and Writing Systems of Ancient Egypt: Chronological and Terminological Guidelines	
Stéphane Polis	
1. Two Centuries after Champollion: The Background to Deciphering	18
Stéphane Polis	
<b>THE SCRIPTS OF EGYPT THROUGHOUT THE AGES</b>	<b>33</b>
2. The Origins and Earliest Developments of Egyptian Hieroglyphic Writing	34
Andréas Stauder	
3. How Does the Hieroglyphic System Function?	42
Stéphane Polis	
4. <b>FOCUS</b> The Frequency of Graphemic Functions in Egyptian Writing	50
Stéphane Polis	
5. Ptolemaic Writing	52
Christophe Thiers	
6. Cursive Hieroglyphs	58
Tobias Konrad	
7. Hieratic	62
Pierre Grandet	
8. <b>FOCUS</b> Abnormal Hieratic	70
Koen Donker van Heel	
9. Demotic	72
Didier Devauchelle	
10. Coptic	80
Esther Garel	
11. Cuneiform in Egypt: The el-Amarna Letters	88
Laurent Colonna d'Istria	
12. Greek in Egypt	92
Jean-Luc Fournet	
13. Latin in Egypt	98
Bruno Rochette	
14. <b>FOCUS</b> Arabic Writing in Egypt	102
Naïm Vantieghem	
15. The Egyptian Origin of the Alphabet	104
Ben J.J. Haring	
16. Egyptian Writing Systems in the Sudan	112
Claude Rilly	
17. The Western Perception of Hieroglyphs, from Classical Antiquity until Decipherment	118
Jean Winand	



## HIEROGLYPHIC WRITING 125

18. The Hieroglyphic Repertoire 126  
Philippe Collombert
19. Inventing the Signs of a Figurative Writing System 133  
Pascal Vernus
20. **FOCUS** How Many Hieroglyphs? 138  
Philippe Collombert
21. The Egyptian Classification of Hieroglyphs 140  
Joachim Friedrich Quack
22. The Sign as an Image... 144  
Dimitri Laboury
23. ... or the Image as a Sign 150  
Dimitri Laboury
24. Reading Statues 154  
Renaud Pietri
25. The Spatial Organisation of Hieroglyphic Texts 158  
Serge Rosmorduc
26. The Materiality of Hieroglyphs and its Typographical Transposition 166  
Dimitri Meeks
27. **FOCUS** Outside the Standards of Beauty:  
An Example of Local Hieroglyphic Style from Asyut 174  
Andrea Fanciulli & Martina Landrino
28. Printing Hieroglyphs with Movable Type Technology 176  
Peter Dils
29. **FOCUS** Encoding Hieroglyphic Texts 180  
Jorke Grotenhuis & Mark-Jan Nederhof
30. Adjustment of the Ancient Egyptian Writing System  
as a Reflection of Language Change 182  
Frank Kammerzell
31. Group Writing and Vocalisation 188  
Marwan Kilani
32. From Determinatives to Classifiers:  
Categorisation in the Ancient Egyptian Writing System 192  
Orly Goldwasser
33. Enigmatic Spelling: Alienating, Encrypting, Sportive 200  
Daniel A. Werning
34. Wordplay and Sign Play 208  
Antonio Loprieno

## CONTEXTS AND USAGES OF SCRIPTS 211

35. Learning to Write 212  
Annie Gasse
36. Portable Written Media: Papyrus, Ostraca, Writing Boards  
and Leather Rolls 218  
Fredrik Hagen
37. **FOCUS** Seals, Sealings, and Writing in Ancient Egypt 226  
Philipp Seyr
38. Writing as Monument 228  
Luc Gabolde

39. <b>FOCUS</b> The <i>Damnatio Memoriae</i> : Remembering to Forget via the Power of the Image Simon Connor	232
40. Inscribing Objects Alexis Den Doncker	234
41. <b>FOCUS</b> Non-Textual Marking Systems in Ancient Egypt Daniel Soliman	240
42. Graffiti, Dipinti and Secondary Epigraphy: Transformation of Space and the Self Andreas Dorn & Chloé Ragazzoli	242
43. <b>FOCUS</b> Paratextual Marks Aurore Motte & Nathalie Sojic	248
44. Writing in Funerary Contexts: The Neutralisation of "Animate" Hieroglyphs in the <i>Pyramid Texts</i> and the <i>Coffin Texts</i> Bernard Mathieu	250
45. Royal Funerary Compositions of the New Kingdom Susanne Bickel	254
46. The <i>Book of the Dead</i> and its Graphic Registers Florence Albert	258
47. Writing to the Dead Sylvie Donnat	264
48. Writing and Administration in the Pharaonic Period Pierre Tallet	268
49. Writing, Medicine and Magic: On the <i>Modus Scribendi</i> of Diagnoses, Therapies and Incantations Hans-W. Fischer-Elfert	274
50. Writing in Balat Laure Pantalacci	280
51. Writing during Ancient Desert Expeditions Vincent Morel	284
52. Writing at Deir el-Medina Dominique Lefèvre	288
53. Writing at Tebtunis in the Graeco-Roman Period Claudio Gallazzi	294
Timeline	298
Map of Egypt	299
Glossary	300
Bibliographic References	304
General Bibliography	308

---

## 11. Cuneiform in Egypt: The el-Amarna Letters




LAURENT COLONNA D'ISTRIA

The “el-Amarna Letters” constitute the only corpus of texts in Mesopotamian cuneiform\* writing that has been discovered in Egypt. The tablets come from the new capital of el-Amarna, founded by Akhenaton (ca. 1350 BC).

This unique corpus is composed of 382 clay tablets and fragments. Three hundred and fifty are diplomatic letters that shed light on relations between the Egypt of Amenhotep IV, also known as Akhenaton, and the great kingdoms of the era—Babylonia, Mittani, and Hatti—as well as certain Levantine rulers, some of whom were under Egyptian dominion. The remainder of the documents (32 tablets and fragments) are literary texts and school texts. They are probably examples of local training activities (§35).

The first tablets were most likely discovered in 1887. By 1907, some 358 were known, the majority of which came from illegal digs and which were acquired by European museums. Official excavations conducted in 1891–1892 led to the discovery of 32 tablets in their archaeological context: 26 came from a single building (Q42.21). This particular building is today understood to have been a storage space for the letters and a venue for teaching activities, as some tablets produced *in situ* as well as a reused tablet were found in the same spot. It is probable that the majority of tablets from the illicit excavations came from this building.

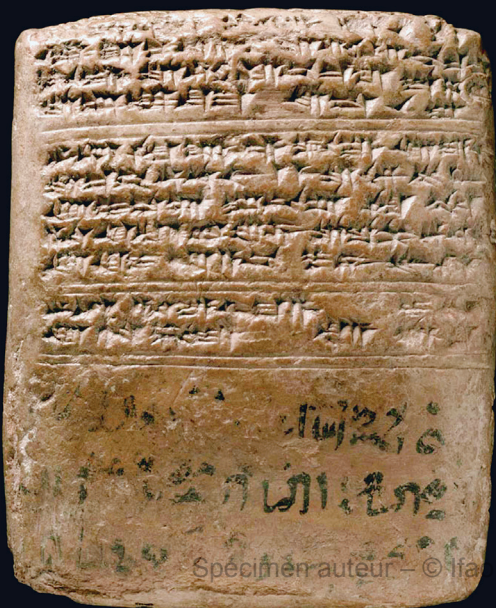
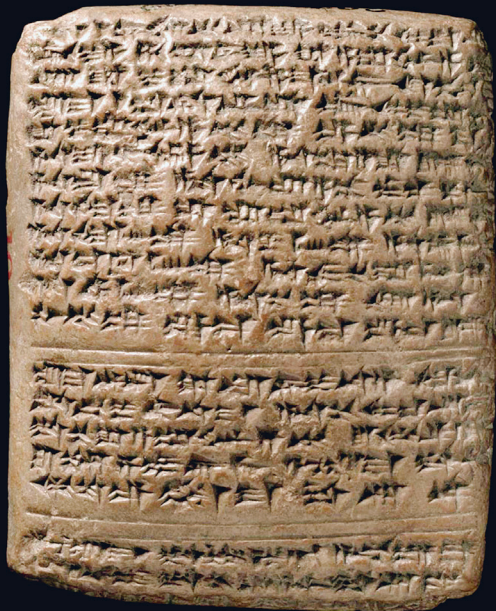
The el-Amarna Letters are evidence of the diversity of languages employed in ancient international correspondence. They include a letter written in *Middle Assyrian*\* (EA 15, Fig. 47), another sent to Tushratta of Mittani in *Hurrian*\* (EA 24), and two missives from the king of Hatti written in Hittite (EA 31–32). In addition, there are letters from Babylonia in *Middle Babylonian*\* and others from the Levant which reveal the use of a *Babylonian koiné* for epistolary purposes as well as two main scribal traditions: the northern tradition of *Hurro-Akkadian* (with the use of Hurrian terms) and a southern tradition called *Canaanite-Akkadian* (which featured the use of Levantine dialectal particularities).

A particular graphic feature of the diplomatic correspondence originating from the Levantine sphere of this period was the use of the “glossenkeil”, a sign that is well attested in the Amarna Letters sent from the Levant. This sign does not belong to the logosyllabic\* repertoire of the cuneiform writing system. The “glossenkeil” appears as two partially overlapping oblique nails , as two oblique nails one after the other , or as a single oblique nail . These forms reflect different scribal practices that run more or less along a



**Fig. 47.** Letter from Ashur-uballit to Akhenaton, reverse side following obverse side along a vertical rotation (EA 15 = MMA 24.2.11; 5.5 x 7.7 cm). © Metropolitan Museum.





**Fig. 48.** Letter from Tushratta to Amenhotep III with annotations in hieratic (EA 23 = BM 29793; 6.9 x 8.6 cm). © British Museum.

north-south line. The “glossenkiel” had multiple functions. It might appear, for example, between two terms from different languages that have the same meaning. The sign could also introduce a lexeme in a language other than Akkadian\* (for example, in Levantine dialect or Hurrian). Moreover, if a scribe had to add signs on the next line to finish a sentence (or sim.), the sign was used to signal that the text was continuous with the text on the previous line.

Another particularity of the Amarna Letters is the presence of annotations in ink (Fig. 48). At least 15 letters bear texts in black or red ink in hieratic writing (§7). These annotations concern the origin of the letter as well as the place and circumstances of the receipt of the missive. Others are composed simply of one or more signs noting that the tablet had been successfully communicated. It is also noteworthy that three of the literary compositions in the corpus display traces of red dots marking prosodic units.