

# INSCRIPTIONS

Stela of Mereri from his Tomb at Denderah  
(6th Dynasty, c. 2200 BC)



<sup>1</sup> Stela of Mereri,  
from Denderah  
● An offering which  
the king gives Osiris /  
● lord of Djedu: a  
voice offering for /  
● the governor,  
overseer of priests,  
guardian of the  
temple cattle /  
● Mereri

## #1 What You Need to Know: Sound Signs

Let us begin a journey into ancient times by making sense of this stela from the tomb of Mereri, one of a pair in this book (we will come to the other on page 34). An Ancient Egyptian stela is a stone block, usually from a tomb, inscribed with hieroglyphs and images, while this particular one is now in the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh.

The first thing you need to know is that hieroglyphs are not a kind of picture writing. Knowing what a particular hieroglyph shows gives you no clue about how to read it. For example, look carefully at the stela of Mereri. On the left you can see the slender, muscular figure of the man himself, in his fine kilt and collar and official's wig. He carries a staff and sceptre as symbols of his

authority. In front of him, four columns of hieroglyphs promise to tell us something about the man and his monument; but what are the hieroglyphs? An eye and a hand, a brace of birds, a couple of seated men, half a lion and a cow – and so on. What sense would you make from these pictures? Certainly not the correct reading, which you can also see in the caption opposite.

So how do we come by the correct reading? The key is to understand that most hieroglyphs write sounds in the Egyptian language. For example, an owl does not mean 'owl'; it writes the sound 'm'. You do not need to know why it writes 'm', any more than you need to know why (in the English alphabet) we use the shape M. It is what we are taught to do. Likewise, just learn that the owl hieroglyph writes the sound 'm' (and the best way to learn it is to copy it out a few times). Here are 16 hieroglyphs that write sounds you know from English:

|                             |   |                         |   |
|-----------------------------|---|-------------------------|---|
| or \ pair of leaves/strokes | y | mouth                   | r |
| quail chick                 | w | fence (seen from above) | h |
| lower leg                   | b | folded cloth/door bolt  | s |
| mat                         | p | dish                    | k |
| viper                       | f | pot stand               | g |
| owl                         | m | small loaf              | t |
| water ripple                | n | hand                    | d |

In addition, these three hieroglyphs write sounds you know well, but we do not have special letters for them in the English alphabet:

|               |   |                                                                   |
|---------------|---|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| lake          | š | 'sh' in ship.                                                     |
| animal tether | i | soft 'i' in <i>adventure</i> , similar to 'ch' in <i>church</i> . |
| snake         | q | soft 'q', similar to 'j' of <i>jail</i> .                         |

It is important to recognize that s and š are different sounds, just as t and i are different and d and q are different. We use the special marks (called diacritics) above and below the letters to indicate the differences.

Now, in just a few moments you have already learned 19 different hieroglyphs and the sounds that they write. Finally, here are seven hieroglyphs that write sounds we do not usually recognize in English:

|                                                                                     |               |   |                                                                                                                                                 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|---|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  | vulture       | ʒ | (Called <i>alif</i> .) The stop in the middle of <i>wh oh</i> or Cockney pronunciation of <i>bottle</i> as <i>bo-ul</i> .                       |
|  | reed leaf     | i | (Called <i>yodh</i> .) The weak 'y' sound at the end of <i>tea</i> (think, half of <i>yl</i> above). Not to be confused with English <i>i</i> . |
|  | forearm       | ʿ | (Called <i>ayin</i> .) Throaty gurgle, like saying <i>a</i> while swallowing.                                                                   |
|  | wick of flax  | h | (Called 'second h'.) Breathy <i>h</i> pronounced in the throat.                                                                                 |
|    | ball of twine | h | (Called 'third h'.) Scots 'ch' in <i>loch</i> .                                                                                                 |
|    | animal belly  | h | (Called 'fourth h'.) Softer than <i>h</i> , like German 'ch' in <i>ich</i> .                                                                    |
|    | hill slope    | k | (Called <i>qaf</i> .) Arabic 'q' in <i>Quran</i> . Like 'k', but pronounced further back in the mouth.                                          |

The last seven sounds may seem offputting, but, remember, you do not have to learn how to *spell* Egyptian (Arabic became the principal language of Egypt about a thousand years ago, and Egyptian is no longer *spoken* or read by anyone there). All you need to do is recognize these sounds wherever they are written. Some folk find a particular problem recognizing that *h*, *h*, *h* and *h* are different sounds in Egyptian. Maybe this illustration will help:

*hr* = above  
  
*hr* = before  
*hr* = beneath

You can see here three different words in Egyptian, with three different meanings and three different sounds. So you must be able to distinguish *hr* from *hr* or *hr*, when the time comes to read them in hieroglyphs (you will do this soon). Because *h*, *h*, *h* and *h* are different sounds, there are different hieroglyphs to write them.

The sounds 'i' and 'w' are called 'weak' sounds. This is because they are often simply dropped from the writing, especially when they appear at the beginning or the end of a word. This is presumably because they were also often dropped in speaking.

### Now practise what you have learned:

— 1-sound signs

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### DID YOU KNOW?

As you can see on the stela of Mereri, the hieroglyph of an owl is carefully drawn showing the bird's feathers. The artists frequently drew or cut hieroglyphs with great care and attention, showing the features of an animal or object in such detail that we can often identify the species of an animal. As a result, we get an insight into the ancient conception of writing as an aspect of art.

