Guide to the Writing Systems of Ancient Egypt

Stéphane Polis (ed.)

INSTITUT FRANÇAIS D'ARCHÉOLOGIE ORIENTALE

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Stéphane Polis (ed.)

Guide to the Writing Systems of Ancient Egypt

Translation into English
Colin Clement

LES GUIDES
DE L'IFAO

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Foreword

LAURENT COULON, DIRECTOR OF THE IFAO

Writing is inextricably linked to the very identity of Pharaonic civilisation. Hieroglyphs appeared at the dawn of the third millennium BC, just before the age of the pyramids, and thereafter they would convey the fundamentals of Ancient Egyptian culture, ideology and religion up until the final closure of Egypt's temples. When Jean-François Champollion managed to decipher this writing system in 1822, a system whose "code" had been lost despite the best efforts of the scholars of the Renaissance, he provided the essential key to understanding Ancient Egypt. At the same time, he effectively founded the discipline of Egyptology, and breathed life into a field of research that has continued unabated, especially in France, for two centuries.

To mark the bicentenary of the deciphering of Egyptian hieroglyphs, the Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale (IFAO) has decided to publish a work aimed at a wide audience that will cover the current state of scholarship on the writing systems of Ancient Egypt, and which simultaneously launches a new series of thematic guides from the IFAO. Quite naturally, the Institute has called upon Stéphane Polis, an eminent specialist in the field and a keen participant in several IFAO research programmes, to oversee this book. He has gathered together a broad range of scholars closely engaged in the different aspects of the subject, and the collective result represents an introduction to the main questions that one might ask regarding writing in Ancient Egypt, as well as an overview of ongoing research into Ancient Egyptian writing systems, thus providing both the informed reader and the student with access to advanced issues in Egyptian philology.

Obviously, hieroglyphic writing and its cursive forms, hieratic and Demotic, take up the largest part of the book. The hieroglyph was born, via a complex process, out of the image, and the earliest examples, from around 3200 BC, are not unambiguous and appear in an era when a wide range of visual identity markers of Pharaonic civilisation were being created. The iconic nature of hieroglyphs would not be erased by scribal conventions but, on the contrary, would be exploited throughout all of Ancient Egyptian history and constantly reiterated in the different applications within architecture, statuary and theology. Having followed Champollion's step-by-step discovery of how hieroglyphic signs "encoded" the Egyptian language within a complex system that mixed the phonetic dimension with the semantic one, the book guides us through the varied forms of Egypt's "sacred characters" and the variety of linguistic, philological, typographical and digital tools that have been used to manage and transcribe them.

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As well as the hieroglyphic system, other scripts have also been used in Egypt during the changes experienced in the country's history. Following the conquest by Alexander the Great, Greek gradually spread under Ptolemaic rule and subsequently shared administrative uses with Latin during the Roman era. Indeed, the exceptional conditions for preservation that maintain in Egypt's deserts have made them the most plentiful source of Graeco-Latin papyri. The Greek alphabet supplemented with signs taken from Demotic would form the basis of Coptic writing which, from the first centuries of the Common Era, was used to write the Egyptian language, creating a paradigm shift that was fatal to the understanding of traditional Egyptian language and culture as conveyed by hieroglyphs. Greek and Coptic would be used for administrative and cultural needs until the Arab conquest changed the situation once again, leading first to the disappearance of the former, while the latter gradually but definitively faded away in favour of the writing system of the conquerors. When we add cuneiform, Meroitic and Proto-Sinaitic, which were also present in the Egyptian sphere of influence, we end up with a veritable kaleidoscope of scripts that sparkles throughout the different chapters of the guide: each writing system accompanies an era in the history of Ancient Egypt.

One of the aims of this guide is indeed also to reveal the different facets of Egyptian writing within archaeological and historical contexts. The reader is invited to delve into ancient administrative life and practices both medical and magical, to journey from the scribal schools to the burial grounds, from the seats of power in Memphis and Thebes to the marginal zones of stone quarries, oases and harbours on the Red Sea. Every year the excavations of the IFAO provide an abundance of archaeological material that adds to the documentation, and this wealth of inscriptions, of writing media and of traces left by the scribes is also presented within these pages. Simply put, this guide is precisely an introduction to Egyptology as founded by Champollion, involving archaeology just as much as philology.

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HIEROGLYPHIC WRITING

Theban Tomb 82. © ULiège/A. Den Doncker, H. Tavier.

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23. … or the Image as a Sign

DIMITRI LABOURY

The particular conventions of Egyptian art are most often designated using the modern term "aspective". These conventions allow an approach to figurative space that regularly breaks with visual perception. Accordingly, different viewpoints of the same object are combined (1). The relative proportions of the elements in a scene are modified according to their importance within the scene or its compositional harmony (2). Representations of beings in profile can also be deployed in an almost obsessive way in order to clearly signify their interactions (3).

These three fundamental principles of Egyptian art were utilised at the dawn of history as the basis for the rules of hieroglyphic typography. In practice, a combination of different viewpoints is used in the drawing of each hieroglyph, while the freedom to modify the relative proportions of the depicted figurative elements led to what Pascal Vernus calls the "calibration" of hieroglyphs, i.e. the modification of their size in relation to the natural referent of the representation for the sake of legibility and harmonious grouping (§25). In this way, to use a favourite example of P. Vernus, a bee or a beetle might take on the same size as a pachyderm in a hieroglyphic inscription. Furthermore, the directional flexibility of hieroglyphs in a monumental context, which may be written from left to right or from right to left (though always from top to bottom), derives directly from an association with the images of people facing one another within the figurative space, i.e. who are depicted interacting in profile, as well as deriving from a propensity towards symmetry in the monumental arts of Pharaonic Egypt.

The link between the written sign and the (specific universe of the) image is a clear form of symbiosis even if the rules of hieroglyphic typography still allow for a clear distinction between depictions and the inscriptions that accompany them. Indeed, although the ancient Egyptians display in their various practices (linguistic or otherwise) a conception of the written sign and the image that includes both within a shared notional category, it should be stressed that this does not mean that they did not make any distinction between the two. On the contrary, thanks to typographic conventions, especially calibration and spatial orientation, the separation between writing and iconography is quite evident in practice.

The line that separates sign and image in ancient Egypt was thin, however, and it could be crossed in many different ways that led to the image being perceived as a written sign. An extreme example is to be found in the decoration of certain architraves in the courtyard of Ramses II at the entrance to the Luxor temple. The expected titles of the king here were not transcribed according to standard hieroglyphic typography, but by means of a series of

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more or less sophisticated visual puns (which Egyptologists have designated as "cryptography" and "enigmatic writing"; §33). They form a long iconographic scene in which a variety of figures, mostly divine, follow each other in procession as if in a line of writing; in fact, they represent the names and titles of the monarch (Fig. 84). Other similar and sometimes well-known instances have been documented from the Graeco-Roman period (§5).

More often, one comes across what P. Vernus has charmingly dubbed "la ronde sémiotique" (lit. the semiotic circle), in which an image can, by typographic calibration, change into a written sign (1) that can in turn be treated once more as an image within an inscription (2), or even be treated independently (3)—for example, in the form of an amulet—particularly when it is placed in a true iconographic setting (4) (think of the innumerable signs of animated *ânkh*, such as 𓋹 and 𓋴). Having become signs before becoming images again, such images are sometimes stretched even further and begin to function as written characters once more, thus completing a four-stage metamorphosis cycle of image into sign into image and back again.

A good example of this type of "semiotic ronde" can be found in the titulary of Sesostris I on the corner of an architrave of the temple built by

Fig. 84. Decoration on architraves in the courtyard of the first pylon of Ramses II at Luxor temple (after Lepsius, K.R., *Denkmäler* III, pl. 149).

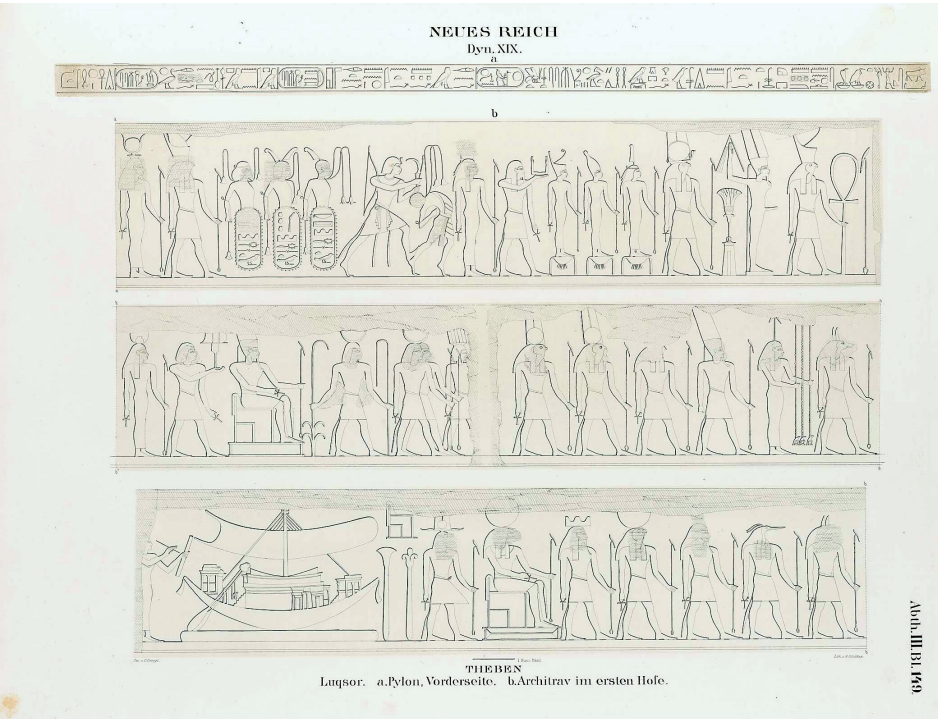

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Fig. 85. Corner of an architrave on the temple built by Sesostris I for Amun-Ra at Karnak.
© Karnak Open-Air Museum/D. Laboury.

Sesostris I for Amun-Ra in Karnak (Fig. 85). Here, the classifier (§32) of the name of Amun-Ra is an image (to the right) whose figurative independence allows it to stand upright; it conveys iconographically the proposition that follows the god's name in the inscription, that "He gives life" () to the king. The hieroglyph that signifies "life" () is also treated as an object that is placed in the rear hand of the god in order to show that he possesses the quality evoked by the sign (as per the Egyptian expression "in hand", which entails possession). It also appears in the divinity's other hand, which reaches out not towards his interlocutor, the king, but towards a group of signs that are clustered around a falcon perched upon the hieroglyph of the golden collar ( ). The golden collar symbolises the third name of the king from his standard royal titulary, the Golden Horus, here rendered as "Horus of Gold – living of births (*ʿnḫ-ms.wt*)", i.e. Sesostris I. In this particular composition, the classifier of the god, (re)converted into an image, and all related hieroglyphs are placed on the right hand-side of the panel, on the side of the temple sanctuary where Amun was supposed to reside. These hieroglyphs face the signs evoking the king (instantiating a symmetry between the figure of the god and the royal cartouche*) in order to signify their interaction.

The permeability of image and sign in Egyptian art even occurs in statuary, i.e. in three-dimensional representations, the image par excellence (§24). Ramses II, who seems to have taken particular intellectual enjoyment in graphic games, was responsible for any number of statues that blurred the borders between image and sign. One of his colossal statues, rediscovered in fragments at the site of Bubastis (in present-day Tell Basta), depicts the king wearing a decorated solar disk on top of his headgear (Fig. 86). Two seated figures are clearly visible on the front of the symbol of Ra. One is a child, crowned with a solar disc ( ), holding a finger to its mouth. Next to the child is the god Amun ( ). They are seated above two gigantic hieroglyphs—of the canal *mr* ( ) and rippling water *n* ( )—and surrounded by three

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signs for *ḥḳꜣ* (𓋹). The inscription on the left hand-side of the object provides the key to this intriguing composition, as it presents the name attributed to this colossus: "Ramses Beloved of Amun, Ra of Leaders (𓇋𓂝𓏏𓏏𓏏)".

As these few examples demonstrate, Egyptian art never ceased to exploit what Jan Assmann referred to as the figurative capacities of writing and the scriptural capacity of the image ("*die Bildhaftigkeit der Schrift und die Schrifthaftigkeit des Bildes*"). According to Egyptian perception, sign and image shared the same nature; the sign derived historically and in practice from the image (§2), thus constituting, it seems, a particular form of the image: both image and written sign permitted one to express and depict the world. In such a context, the ancient Egyptian artist—or at least the artist who conceived any given work—manifestly had to be a master of hieroglyphs too, a learned and lettered artist.

Fig. 86. Crowning element of a colossal statue of Ramses II representing a solar disk decorated with a figurative hieroglyphic composition, to be read as the name of the colossus as inscribed on the left-hand side of the object (CG 1235). © Egyptian Museum, Cairo/S. Connor.

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Timeline

Protodynastic era and earliest dynasties ca. 3300-2686 BC	Naqada IIIA-B / so-called Dynasty 0 (3300-3000) Naqada IIIC-D / 1st-2nd Dynasties (3000-2686)
Old Kingdom 2686-2160 BC	3rd Dynasty (2686-2613) 4th Dynasty (2613-2494) 5th Dynasty (2494-2345) 6th Dynasty (2345-2181) 7th-8th Dynasties (2181-2160)
First Intermediate Period 2160-2055 BC	9th-10th Dynasties (2160-2025) - Heracleopolis 11th Dynasty (2125-2055) - Thebes
Middle Kingdom 2055-1773 BC	11th Dynasty (2055-1985) - Thebes 12th Dynasty (1985-1773) - Lisht
Second Intermediate Period 1773-1550 BC	13th Dynasty (1773-1650) - Lisht 14th Dynasty (1773-1650) - Eastern Delta 15th Dynasty (1660-1550) so-called Hyksos - Avaris 16th-17th Dynasties (1650-1550) - Thebes
New Kingdom 1550-1069 BC	18th Dynasty (1550-1295) 19th Dynasty (1295-1186) 20th Dynasty (1186-1069) } Ramesside Period
Third Intermediate Period 1069-664 BC	21st Dynasty (1069-943) - Tanis and Thebes 22nd Dynasty (943-730) - Bubastis and Thebes 23rd Dynasty (730-712) - Tanis 24th Dynasty (716-712) - Sais 25th Dynasty (ca. 743-664), so-called Kushite or Ethiopian
Late Period 664-332 BC	26th Dynasty (664-526) - Sais 27th Dynasty (526-404) - First period of Persian domination 28th Dynasty (404-399) 29th Dynasty (399-380) 30th Dynasty (380-342) Second period of Persian domination (342-332)
Greek Period 332-30 BC	Macedonian Dynasty (332-309) Ptolemaic Dynasty (304-30)
Roman Period 30 BC-395 AD	
Byzantine Period 395-642 AD	
Arab conquest 642 AD	

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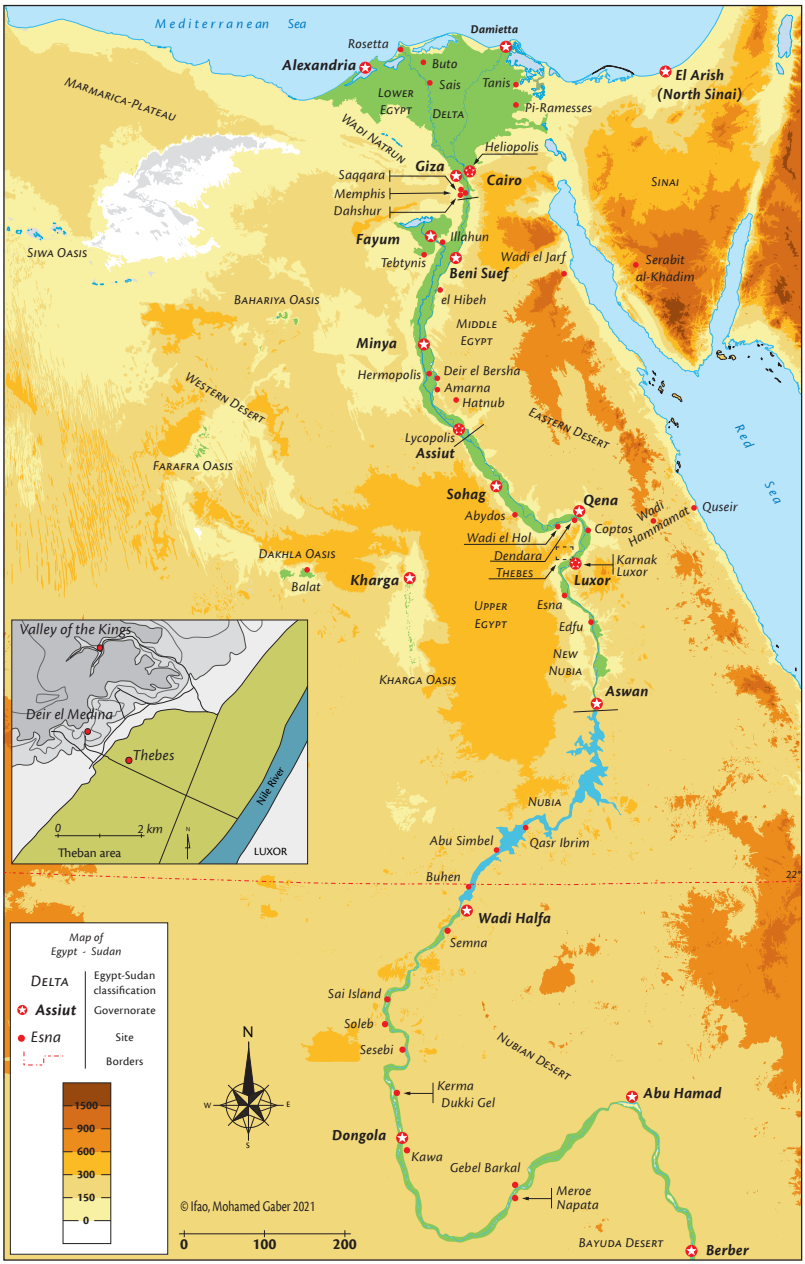
Map of Egypt



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Glossary

Abjad: a writing system in which only consonants are noted. Long vowels can sometimes also be noted. Short vowels may be indicated by diacritics but are generally inferred by the reader.

Abugida: a writing system based on units denoting a consonant-vowel sequence. Other signs (diacritics) may modify or cancel the default vowel.

Acrophony: derivation principle that retains only the first sound of a word (for instance, T for Tango). In particular, the use of an image of an object or idea to represent phonetically the initial sound of the name of that object or idea.

Akkadian: a Semitic language used in Mesopotamia between the first half of the 3rd and the 1st millennium BC. Two main dialects are recognised from the 2nd millennium: Babylonian in the south and Assyrian in the north.

Alphasyllabary: see *abugida*.

Amphiboly: ambiguity or potential double meaning.

Biconsonantal: see *biliteral.*

Biliteral: a writing sign denoting two consonants.

Biscripturality: the use of two (and possibly more) distinct writing systems for the same language.

Bohairic: a Coptic dialect of Lower Egypt, which became the official liturgical language of the Coptic Church from the 11th century AD.

Boustrophedon: a style of writing in which alternate lines of writing are reversed, right to left and then left to right, rather than lines always beginning on the same side (and reading always running in the same direction).

Canopic vase: four Canopic vases featured as part of Egyptian funerary equipment and held the embalmed viscera of the deceased, which had been removed during mummification.

Cartouche: in Egyptian texts a cartouche is an elongated oval containing two of a pharaoh's five names, that of "King of Upper and Lower Egypt" and that of "Son of Ra".

Classifier: also called "determinative"; a writing sign that is not pronounced but specifies the semantic category or the referent of the word it classifies. See §3 and §32.

Coptic: see §10.

Cryptographic (writing): also called "enigmatic writing", see §33.

Cuneiform: a writing system used in Ancient Mesopotamia; first used to denote Sumerian and Akkadian before being employed to write other languages of the Near East such as Hittite, Elamite (in Iran) and Hurrian. Originally this script was largely figurative but the signs quickly evolved into a set of wedge-shaped marks resulting from the pressing of a reed pen into a clay tablet.

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Demotic: see §9.

Determinative: also called "classifier". See §3 and §32.

Dipinti: an epigraphic term used to designate painted inscriptions as opposed to *graffiti*, which are engraved or incised (plural of *dipinto*).

Ductus: in palaeography the term refers to the direction and sequencing of the strokes that make up a writing sign, as well as the speed of execution and the rhythm that characterises an individual handwriting.

Gloss: commentary or explanation added between the lines or in the margins of a text.

Graffiti: an epigraphic term used to designate inscriptions that are engraved or incised as opposed to *dipinti* which are painted (plural of graffito).

Hieratic: see §7.

Hittite: an Anatolian language of the Indo-European family spoken by the Hittite people. It is generally attested in cuneiform script and, less often, in monumental hieroglyphic inscriptions.

Hurrian: an ergative and agglutinative language of the Hurrian people who lived in northern Mesopotamia. The language was written in cuneiform script but belongs to neither the Semitic nor the Indo-European family of languages. The majority of textual sources date to the second half of the 2nd millennium BC.

Ideogram: a graphic symbol that represents an idea without necessarily conveying any clue as to its pronunciation. See §3.

Lagid: see *Ptolemaic*.

Logogram: a written character that represents a complete word, i.e., both its meaning and pronunciation. See §3.

Logo-syllabary: a writing system that employs both logograms and phonograms denoting syllables.

Meroitic: the Nilo-Saharan language of the Kingdom of Kush (8th century BC–4th century AD), which takes its name from the town of Meroe, capital of the kingdom from the 3rd century BC. The same term is used for the cursive alpha-syllabary writing system employed to write the language from the end of the 3rd century BC. It is composed of 23 signs borrowed, in all likelihood, from the local Demotic standard. The invention of Meroitic hieroglyphic writing was based upon this cursive, local scribes having proposed sign by sign equivalents between the cursive and Egyptian hieroglyphs.

Middle Assyrian: a dialect of Akkadian used in northern Mesopotamia during the second half of the 2nd millennium BC.

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Middle Babylonian: a dialect of Akkadian used in southern Mesopotamia during the second half of the 2nd millennium BC.

Monoconsonantal (sign): see uniliteral.

Multiconsonantal (sign): see pluriliteral.

Onomastics: the study of proper names; by extension, the term refers to names attested in any given period.

Ostracon: pottery shard or piece of (lime)stone used as a surface for writing or drawing (plural, *ostraca*). See §36.

Phonetic complement: a writing sign that helps in the reading of another sign by specifying its pronunciation. See §3.

Phonetic determinative: also called "phonetic classifier" and "phono-repeater". See §3.

Phonogram: a written symbol that represents one or several sounds. In Western alphabets, a letter is generally a phonogram that denotes a single phoneme—the letter *b* represents the sound /b/—, but a phonogram can also represent a syllable or a sequence of several consonants. See §3.

Pictogram: a graphic symbol that conveys meaning but without necessarily being associated to a standard pronunciation. A cigarette with an oblique line through it can, for example, be understood as "Smoking prohibited", "No smoking", "Non-smoking zone", etc. See §3.

Pluriliteral: a writing sign that denotes a sequence of several consonants.

Ptolemaic: an adjective referring to the dynasty that ruled Egypt between 323 and 30 BC. It was founded by Ptolemy Lagos, a Macedonian general in the army of Alexander the Great, and thus is sometimes referred to as the Lagid Dynasty. By extension, "Ptolemaic" is applied to the hieroglyphic writing that was used under the Ptolemies and the Roman emperors, as well as to the so-called 'traditional Egyptian' that was used for these inscriptions. See §5.

Radicogram: a writing sign that denotes a root, that is, a minimal abstract unit composed of consonants. This root can be employed in different words of related meaning. See §3.

Sahidic: a dialect of Coptic that became the standard literary language in all Egypt during the 4th century AD (except in the Delta where Bohairic remained predominant). The term Sahidic derives from the Arabic *sa'id* designating Upper Egypt.

Scriptio continua: a Latin expression meaning "continuous script", a style of writing without spaces or other marks between words.

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Semogram: a writing sign associated with an idea or concept, but not necessarily with a given pronunciation. See §3.

Semography: a system of signs composed of semograms. The sound dimension is not directly denoted by semographies, which denote solely meanings. See §2.

Serekh: a rectangle representing the plan of a palace enclosing the Horus name of a pharaoh.

Syllabary: a writing system in which the basic units denote syllables and not individual sounds or phonemes as in alphabetic writing.

Triliteral: a writing sign denoting three consonants.

Ugaritic: a Hamito-Semitic language found in documents from Ugarit, an ancient port city in what is now northern Syria, from between the 15th and the 12th century BC. The term also refers to the *abjad* (or consonantal alphabet) composed of cuneiform signs that was used to write this language.

Uniliteral: a writing sign denoting one consonant.

Ushabti: also called *shawabtis*, are statuettes placed, often in large numbers, in Egyptian tombs. They represent funerary workers intended to perform agricultural work in place of the deceased should Osiris require it.

Vocalisation: the act of specifying the vowels to be pronounced between consonants in scripts that do not (or only partially) denote the vowels.

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The scholarly literature on the ancient Egyptian writing system and scripts is very rich. On the coexistence of different scripts in ancient Egypt, one might profitably consult the complementary works of Parkinson (1999), Baines (2012), von Lieven, Lippert (2016), and Stauder (2020b). For a general introduction to the hieroglyphic writing system, the reader can turn to Davies (1987), Altenmüller (2010) or Winand (2020), each of whom has his own perspective. Several great figures of Egyptology are inextricably linked to the study of writing in Egypt, and it would be difficult to single out one particular book or study given that their thinking has come to be invested in such a broad array of publications: Wolfgang Schenkel and Pascal Vernus have explored the workings of hieroglyphic writing; Henry George Fischer and Dimitri Meeks have analysed many questions of palaeography, spatiality, and lexicology; Orly Goldwasser, Frank Kammerzell, Antonio Loprieno, and Ludwig Morenz have investigated the semographic and phonographic dimensions of Egyptian writing in semiotically informed frameworks. Many useful recent references can be found in the *Handbook* by Davies, Laboury (eds., 2020).

As a result of this wealth, the authors of each article had to make a restricted selection from the numerous available works, opting for classic studies as well as recent and original papers that might serve as useful entries into further enquiries.

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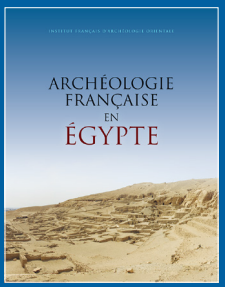

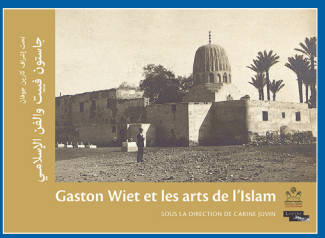

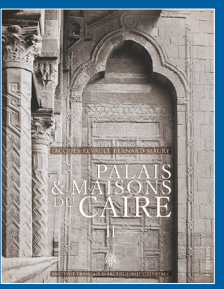

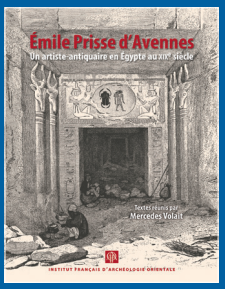

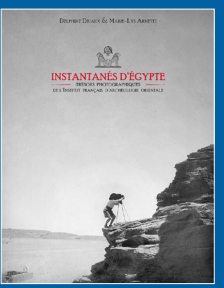

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