

Ancient Egyptian Writing among Other Writing Systems: An Introductory Essay

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Abstract

The present essay briefly sketches aspects by which ancient Egyptian writing resembles and differs from other writing systems. Like all pristine writing systems, Egyptian writing is a mixed system, representing both the sound and meaning of language in its signs. Among these pristine systems, it is typologically remarkable for its focus on roots rather than syllables, its uniquely rich development of classifiers/semantic determinatives, and its early and thorough-going phonetization. Beyond language, Egyptian writing is one of a few, mostly genetically unrelated forms of hieroglyphic writing, with other notable examples being Mesoamerican hieroglyphs and Luwian hieroglyphs in Anatolia. The hieroglyphic type of writing is distinguished by the retained pictoriality of its signs, a rich dialogue between language and image, and specific graphic ideologies and conceptions of the hieroglyphic sign. Egypt and Anatolia both show a digraphic situation, with differences. Unlike, for example, cuneiform, Egyptian was not adapted to other languages, but two writing systems were invented in contact with Egyptian writing, in altogether different contexts: Proto-Sinaitic and Meroitic. In entirely different ways, both show aspects of what might be termed a ‘quasi-hieroglyphy’, providing ancient outside views on hieroglyphic writing and speaking to the enduring allure of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing.