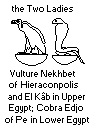
[[](http://www.friesian.com/ross/#egypt)](http://www.friesian.com/ross/#egypt)

**The Pronunciation  
of  
Ancient Egyptian**

The issue of the pronunciation of the Ancient Egyptian language has recently become confused by popular presentations that ignore some of the essential and undoubted characteristics of Egyptian hieroglyphics, most importantly that Egyptian, just as today is usually the case with Arabic and Hebrew, did not write vowels -- except in late transcriptions of foreign (mainly Greek) words. For a time French (vowels) and German (no vowels) scholars hotly debated this, but the matter was settled more than a century ago. This is typically not explained to people who are told that their names can be written in such and such a way in hieroglyphics (cf. [Nom en hieroglyphes](http://khety.iut.univ-paris8.fr/~rosmord/nomhiero.html)), or who are simply told that the name of the Egyptian sun god is "Ra" -- the pronunciation we find in the recent entertaining but historically absurd movies *Stargate* (1994) and *The Mummy* (1999). Well, "ra" may be *Tahitian* for "sun," but it is not Ancient Egyptian.

As it happens, the *Egyptian* dialogue in those movies, reconstructed by [Stuart Tyson Smith](http://www.anth.ucsb.edu/faculty/stsmith/), avoids that mistake, for anyone who listens carefully; but the misconception is perpetuated by the English dialogue, despite Dr. Smith's advice. Indeed, although the Egyptians did not write vowels in Egyptian words, there is evidence about what the vowels were in many words. But the evidence is for different stages of the Egyptian language. For most of Egyptian history the language written in actual hieroglyphics or in its cursive counterpart, *hieratic*, was the literary language initiated in the [XII Dynasty](http://www.friesian.com/notes/midking.htm#12) (1991-1786) of the Middle Kingdom. That is called "Middle Egyptian." In hieroglyphics or hieratic, therefore, one is only likely to encounter either Middle Egyptian or the earlier literary form of the language, Old Egyptian, the language spoken in the [Archaic Period](http://www.friesian.com/notes/oldking.htm#archaic) (I & II Dynasties, c. 3100-2680) and the [Old Kingdom](http://www.friesian.com/notes/oldking.htm#old) (III-VI Dynasties, 2680-2159). While **Sir Alan Gardiner**, in his great and indispensable ***Egyptian Grammar*** [Oxford University Press, 1927, 1964], says that Middle Egyptian was "possibly the vernacular of Dynasties IX-XI," [Stephen Fryer](http://home.prcn.org/~sfryer/pronunciation.html) has brought to my attention recent research to the effect that the literary language of the XII Dynasty was in some measure an artificial attempt to return to the forms of Old Egyptian. Since the political project of Egyptian Kings was always to restore things "as they were in the beginning," this is not surprising. Middle Egyptian, therefore, may have something like the status of Classical Sanskrit, which restored and fixed the forms of the language of the [Vedas](http://www.friesian.com/upan.htm#veda) but could not undo all the changes that had already occurred in the spoken language.

Although Middle Egyptian became the literary and written language, the spoken language continued to change. The language of the [New Kingdom](http://www.friesian.com/notes/newking.htm#chron) (XVIII-XX Dynasties, 1575-1087) and much of the [Third Intermediate Period](http://www.friesian.com/notes/newking.htm#late) (XXI-XXIV Dynasties, 1087-715) is then called "New" or "Late Egyptian." By the Ramessid Period (Dynasties XIX & XX), most hieratic documents are in Late Egyptian. The best evidence of the pronunciation of Late Egyptian, however, is from the documents found in the diplomatic archives of Amenhotep III and Akhenaton at Amarna, for these documents were kept in [Akkadian](http://www.friesian.com/notes/oldking.htm#sumer), not in Egyptian. Akkadian was the diplomatic language of the day, essentially the same language as its two daughter languages, Babylonian and Assyrian; and its system of writing, cuneiform, represented vowels. Late Egyptian *grammar* also begins to be revealed by hieroglyphic inscriptions during the reign of Akhenaton, when the spoken language briefly replaced Middle Egyptian. Thus, while Old and Middle Egyptian did not have a definite article ("the"), Late Egyptian does, **p3**, later pronounced "pi" or "pe" in Coptic -- though now it appears that this change had already begun in the actual spoken language of the XII Dynasty.

Following Late Egyptian are two stages of the spoken language, Demotic (c. 715 BC-470 AD) and Coptic (c. 400 AD-c. 1600). Egyptian words borrowed into early Greek probably reflect Demotic (Greek *demotikos* = "popular") pronunciation. Demotic was written in its own cursive script, so this form of the written language is also called "Demotic." While the last hieroglyphic inscription was made at Philae in 394 AD, not long after the Christian Roman Emperor [Theodosius I](http://www.friesian.com/romania.htm#theodos) (379-395) ordered the closure of pagan temples, the last Demotic text is from 470.

Demotic writing disappeared only because, as the Egyptians themselves converted to Christianity, they ceased to use the old script. Instead, they began to write in the Greek alphabet, with the addition of seven letters borrowed from Demotic to write sounds that didn't exist in Greek. mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/history/alpha-q.gifSince vowels **did** exist in Greek, we suddenly have the complete vocalization of the last stage of the Egyptian language, which is then called "Coptic," from the Arabic term for Egyptian Christians, the Copts, *al-Qubt.* (or *Qibt.*). *That* word was from, via Coptic, the Greek name for Egypt, *Aigyptos*, which was derived from an Egyptian name for Memphis, **H.wtk3pth.** (or **8wtk3pt8**, see below for the use of the numbers), the "House of the Soul [**K3**] of Ptah." Ptah was the patron god of Memphis. The name Memphis itself apparently comes from **Mnnfr**, originally the name of the pyramid of King Pepi I of the [VI Dynasty](http://www.friesian.com/notes/oldking.htm#6), "Enduring Beauty," or, with the name of the King understood, "The Goodness of Pepi Endures". Coptic slowly died out as Egyptians converted to Islam and Arabic became the spoken language.

Although it ceased to be a spoken language by the 17th century, Coptic remains the liturgical language of the [Coptic Church](http://www.friesian.com/popes.htm#coptic), to which 6% of Egyptians still belong, and thus is as well remembered and used in that context as Latin is in the Catholic Church or classical Arabic is in Islam. So even now Coptic is *not* a "dead" language the way Babylonian is (whose last cuneiform inscription was in 75 AD). **Jean François Champollion** (1790-1832) learned Coptic because he suspected it was the same language written in the hiergylyphics of the Rosetta Stone. He was right, and was thus aided in his epic decipherment. The Copts themselves recently achieved international prominence when one of their number, [Butros Butros-Ghali](javascript:popup('notes/butros.jpg','butros','resizable,width=167,height=230')), served as Secretary General of the United Nations. There is also now a large Coptic immigrant community in the United States, swollen by people fleeing terrorist activity by Islamic fundamentalists in Egypt.

There are different kinds of signs used in Ancient Egyptian writing. "Ideograms" represent whole words, usually with a two or three consonant root, as in Arabic or Hebrew. Thus the glyph mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/NFR.gifis the word "good" or "beautiful," or "*be* good," "beautiful," "happy," although it is a picture, according to Sir Alan Gardiner, of the heart and windpipe (it looks like a banjo to me). An ideogram that is an image of its object is a "pictogram," like the glyph for the scarab or dung-beetle, mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/KHPR.gif, or like that for the sun, mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/R9.gif.

However, if the consonant root of the ideogram or pictogram occurs in other words, it can be transferred to use as a "phonogram," simply representing the sounds. Thus the glyph mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/MN.gif, a picture of a gaming board, is used as a "biliteral" phonogram in many words, e.g. **mn** "remain," **mnkh** "efficient," **mnt** "thigh," in the common name of the god Amon, etc. The glyph mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/KHPR.gifcan be used as a "triliteral" phonogram to mean "become" or can occur in **khprsh**, a certain blue crown worn by the king. This could be confusing, so words are often also written with "generic determinatives," glyphs that were not pronounced but indicated what kind of thing a word was, e.g. mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/GOD.gifwhich shows that a word is the name of a god, or which shows that a word has something to do with writing. This device was also used in cuneiform.

Besides phonograms that stand for two or three consonants, there are also 24 (or 25) signs that represented single ("uniliteral") sounds, the Egyptian "alphabet." These were originally ideograms also, and some continued to stand for common words. For instance, mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/R.gifis the picture of a mouth, is used to mean "mouth," "language," etc., and is a uniliteral sign. These alphabetic signs were frequently written with ideograms or pictograms as "phonetic complements," both to provide reminders about pronunciation and to distinguish meanings, as when grammatical endings differentiate between nouns and verbs, or between singular and plural. For us, the alphabetic signs can conveniently be used to represent and discuss Egyptian phonology.

Note that Egyptian glyphs have a front and a back. All the images above and below face to the left, e.g. the alphabetic sign , which indicates that the text is to be read from left to right. This is conformable with the usage of English and other European languages. However, although this would be familiar and agreeable to the Egyptians, Egyptian usage was *ordinarily* to write from *right to left*, as today is done in Hebrew and Arabic. They indicated this direction by having all the glyphs *face to the right* instead of to the left, which transforms the sign for **d** above to . Much the same thing was done with the Greek alphabet, whose left to right form consisted of mirror images of the original Phoenician letters that had been adopted and that were at first written, like Phoenician, right to left. The Egyptians also often wrote from top to bottom in narrow columns, so Egyptian text could even be easily integrated into Chinese and Japanese books.

Resources on ancient languages are sparse today. For a long time the only Coptic grammar I had seen, some years ago in the UCLA Research Library, was in French, for Catholic missionaries to Egypt (I think this was A. Mallon's *Grammaire copte* [Imprimerie catholique, Beirut, 1956]). Now, one kind of thing that seems to be easily obtainable are reprints of older, even much older grammars. Thus, British American Books (Willits, California), has reprinted Henry Tattam's *Coptic Grammar* of 1830. The print is clear and it looks to be a fairly complete grammar (for its day and age), but it lacks a vocabulary list. Similarly, a reprint of William B. MacDonald's *Sketch of Coptic Grammar* of 1856 is available from the same publisher, but its usefulness is compromised by its being a hand written text. I have just obtained, however, a good modern grammar, although it is intended as a textbook more than a scientific description of the language: *Introduction to Sahidic Coptic*, by Thomas O. Lambdin [Mercer University Press, Macon, GA, 1988]. Although set up in courier, which makes the whole thing look like typescript, the book has a clear Coptic typeface. It also has a 150 page Coptic-English glossary.

For Egyptian itself, there are more reprints. Many books by E.A. Wallis Budge are available from Dover, but they are grotesquely out of date and perhaps had better be avoided -- a generation or more of readers may be hopelessly confused by Budge's use of vowels. Better is *Egyptian Hieroglyphic Grammar: With Vocabularies, Exercises, Chrestomathy (A First-Reader), Sign-List & Glossary* by S.A. Mercer, reprinted from 1926 by Ares Publishers (Chicago).

Still without peer, and still in print, is Gardiner's *Egyptian Grammar*. A new grammar of similar quality, with vocabulary, **James E. Hoch's *Middle Egyptian Grammar*** [ISBN 0-920168-12-4], although "not entirely finished" and provided only in spiral binding, has now become available, either from Benben Publications (1483 Carmen Drive, Mississauga, Ontario L5G 3Z2, Canada) or from [James Hoch](mailto:james_hoch@campuslife.utoronto.ca) himself. I have also just obtained *A Late Egyptian Grammar*, produced posthumously from the materials of the great Egyptologist **Jaroslav Cerný** by Sarah Israelit Groll and Christopher Eyre [Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, Roma, 1993]. This treatment looks grammatically thorough, exhaustive, and exhausting, but doesn't have a vocabulary list.

A vast graphic type font set for Egyptian and the hieroglyphic text processing programs "Glyph for Windows" and "MacScribe" used to be available on line at The Extended Library, but the site no longer seems to exist. The font set itself, which uses the same classification system as Gardiner's *Egyptian Grammar*, is now accessible at [Hieroglyphica](http://perso.wanadoo.fr/hieroglyphes/CCER-Hieroglyphica.htm). I do not know where the original *Publications Interuniversitaires de Recherches Egyptologiques Informatisees* [edited by Nicolas Grimal, Jochen Hallof, Dirk van der Plas, Utrecht, Paris 1993] has moved.

The following table presents and discusses the alphabetic hieroglyphic signs in the order of phonetic type used by scholars. A number of the sounds do not exist in languages like English but still do exist in Arabic, which is distantly related to Egyptian: So Egyptians today can still vocalize sounds from the ancient language that otherwise would be unpronounceable in other modern languages. When I visited Egypt, Egyptian guides who could read hieroglyphics appeared to enjoy using the sounds that they could pronounce but that many European tourists had never heard before. Terms for the sounds are those used in the *Phonetic Symbol Guide*, by Geoffrey K. Pullum and Willian A. Ladusaw [University of Chicago Press, 1986]. The discussion of the glyphs is mainly based on Gardiner. A recent technical discussion of Egyptian phonology (and grammar) may be found in ***Ancient Egyptian, A linguistic introduction*, by Antonio Loprieno** [Cambridge University Press, 1995]. Note that audio files may take some time to load.

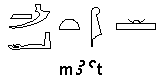
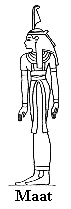
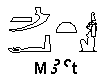
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| The picture of a vulture, this represents the sound of a "glottal stop" (or "glottal plosive"), which is a brief closing of the wind pipe, like a little cough. This is the Hebrew aleph, the Arabic hamza, or the English Cockney pronunciation of "t" in ["bottle."](http://www.friesian.com/sounds/bottle.wav) A special symbol is used for this in transcription type fonts for Egyptian. In ASCII text, I use the number "3."  Loprieno (p. 31) points out that **3** corresponds to an **r** in [Semitic](http://www.friesian.com/trees.htm#semitic) languages and so, for an uncertain period of Egyptian history, may have been some version of an **r** ("a uvular trill") in Egyptian. Now Hoch emphatically *denies* that **3** was *ever* a glottal stop (p. 9) but gives no reference. | The picture of a flowering reed, this was originally a "y" (palatal glide) and could still be written that way (or the German version of a "y", **j**). The special symbol often used for this sound, however, is the letter "i" with an apostrophe instead of the dot. The "y" in Egyptian was so weak that it was rarely pronounced. Words beginning with "y," like the name of the god Amon, simply begin with vowels in the evidence of vocalization that we have. How this contrasts with **3** is a good question -- Hoch simply says that's what it can be; but some languages, like Hawaiian, make a real distinction between words or syllables beginning with a glottal stop and words or syllables beginning with vowels. We don't have enough evidence about Ancient Egyptian to know if that was the case there.  In ASCII, it will be necessary to use "y," a question mark, "?," which is used for a glottal stop in some systems for Arabic, or perhaps the number "7." | The Egyptians wrote the previous letter twice in certain contexts. Since this was usually at the end of a word, it has been argued that this is the same usage as in Hebrew or Arabic and that it actually represents the **vowel** of a long "i." It is hard to argue with this. Where "yy" is usually written inside words, as in the Demotic word for "Greek," **Wynn**, which is clearly from "Ionian," there is little doubt that a long "i" is meant.  In transcription, "yy" is usually written "y" (in contrast to the "i" + apostrophe for "y") -- or "jj" if "j" is used for the undoubled sound. These are noncommital on the issue of the letter being a vowel. | The picture of a forearm, this represents a strongly guttural consonant, the [*'ayn*[mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/ayn.gif](http://www.friesian.com/sounds/ayn.wav)](http://www.friesian.com/sounds/ayn.wav) in Arabic. The throat contracts but does not close (a voiced pharyngeal fricative). Egyptians today have no trouble with this, but it is a sound that does not occur in Indo-European languages and has disappeared from other Semitic languages, as it did from Coptic. Transcription type fonts represent this with a large apostrophe that is concave to the right, like a pried open "c." As in some systems for Arabic, we can use the number "9." | The picture of a quail chick, this is simply a "w" (labial glide). However, like "y," the "w" has become very weak and sometimes disappears. While it is tempting and sometimes compelling to read it in some contexts as a vowel, as in the name of the builder of the Great Pyramid, **khwfw**, "Khufu," we usually don't have any evidence about that. "W" is written "ou" in Coptic, but this is because there is no "w" in Greek and "ou" can make do. When it is followed by a vowel, there is not much ambiguity. Thus, **wshb**, "answer" in Egyptian, is **ouôsheb** or **wôsheb** in Coptic. Similarly, mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/t3w9t.gif, "The One" (female, for a goddess) in Egyptian, is mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/t3w9t-c.gifin Coptic. |
| mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/B.gif | mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/P.gif | mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/F.gif | mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/M.gif | mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/N.gif |
| The picture of a foot, this is a "b" (voiced bilabial stop/plosive). B's in Egyptian often correspond to m's in Hebrew or Arabic. Thus the root **slm** in Arabic or **shlm** in Hebrew, "peace," "to be healthy," etc., is **snb** in Egyptian. Similarly, b's in such Semitic languages can turn up as m's in Egyptian: **Rmnn** for **Lbnn**, "Lebanon." | The picture of a stool, this is a "p" (unvoiced bilabial stop). Note that p doesn't exist in Classical Arabic, which means that words from Coptic like "pa" ("the") turn up as "ba" in Arabic. | The picture of a horned viper, this an an "f" (voiceless labiodental or bilabial fricative). | The picture of an owl, this is an "m" (bilabial nasal resonant). | The picture of water, this is an "n" (alveolar nasal resonant). |
| mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/R.gif | mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/H.gif | mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/HH.gif | mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/KH.gif | mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/HCH.gif |
| The picture of a mouth, this is an "r" (a resonant whose varieties can no longer be determined for ancient Egyptian). Note that there is no **l** in Egyptian. Usually Egyptians just pronounced foreign l's as r's. When Greek names, like "Ptolemaios" or "Kleopatra," were later transcribed, the biliteral sign **rw** was used for "l."  Loprieno (p. 31), however, advances the opinion that the contrast between **r** and **l** may not have been lost in all dialects of Egyptian, since independent l's emerge in Coptic and also seem to have been indicated by an **nr** "grapheme" in Late Egyptian texts that reflect the spoken language. | The picture of a reed shelter in fields, this is a simple "h" (a voiceless glottal fricative). | The picture of a wick of twisted flax, this represents another strongly guttural consonant, an h which, like **9** above, occurs with a strong contraction of the throat, but without voicing (a voiceless pharyngeal fricative). This is the letter [*h.a*[mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/hha.gif](http://www.friesian.com/sounds/hha.wav)](http://www.friesian.com/sounds/hha.wav) in Arabic, another sound that Egyptians today can still pronounce without difficulty. It is **not** like the "ch" in "Channakah" in Ashkenazi Hebrew. This presents special difficult for ASCII representation. Some typescript systems for Arabic use a capital "H," but here I will continue with a postscript period, as for Arabic, though, continuing the use of numbers, and considering its similarity to the original glyph, the number **8** might be good. | This is a picture that may be a placenta, because it is used to write "placenta," but it is hard to see how it is pictographic. It represents the sound **kh** which occurs in Hebrew and Arabic, in the German pronunciation of [**Nacht**](http://www.friesian.com/sounds/nacht.wav), or in the Scottish pronunciation of "Loch" (a voiceless velar fricative). **kh** is an adequate transcription, though underlined to emphasize that it is a digraph. | The picture of "an animal's belly with teats," this represents a softer form of **kh** (a voiceless palatal instead of a velar fricative), as in the German pronunciation of [**ich**](http://www.friesian.com/sounds/ich.wav) (*not* German dialect pronunciations as **ish**). The Egyptians didn't always distinguish this from **kh** themselves. **Ch** could be used to transcribe it, if this weren't easily confused with **tsh** below.  Now Hoch says that this simply has "an unknown value," but suggests it may have been like a Welsh **ll**. This is interesting, mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/dad.gifsince the Welsh **ll** had also been suggested as the original pronunciation of the Arabic *d.âd*. |
| mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/S.gif | mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/Z.gif | mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/SH.gif | mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/Q.gif | mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/K.gif |
| The picture of a piece of folded cloth, this is an "s" (voiceless alveolar fricative). In Old Egyptian this was contrasted with "z," and is in that context transcribed with an acute mark on top. In Middle Egyptian, however, both s and z were used to write s's. | The picture of a bolt, this was a "z" in Old Egyptian (voiced alveolar fricative). In Middle Egyptian, however, z came to be used to write s's. | The picture of a pool, this was an "sh" just like in English, Hebrew, and Arabic (voiceless palato-alveolar fricative). | The picture of a hill-slope, this was like the [*qaf*[mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/qaf.gif](http://www.friesian.com/sounds/qaf.wav)](http://www.friesian.com/sounds/qaf.wav) in classical Arabic (voicless uvular stop/plosive). That is a "k" that is pronounced at the soft palate, at the back of the mouth, rather than on the hard palate, further forward, as a "k" normally is. This is no longer pronounced different from a "k" in Hebrew, but most Arabs can pronounce it properly, even though there are dialect variations in spoken Arabic: Sometimes it is replaced by a glottal stop (in Lebanon and Egypt itself); and in the Gulf it is *voiced* (a voiced uvular plosive), like a "g" pronounced on the soft palate, as it is in [Persian](http://www.friesian.com/sounds/gof.wav) (initial position only), which borrowed it from Arabic. In Coptic it became a "k." | The picture of a basket with handle, this is a regular "k" (voicless velar stop/plosive). |
| mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/G.gif | mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/T.gif | mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/TSH.gif | mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/D.gif | mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/DJ.gif |
| The picture of a stand for a jar, this is a "g," pronounced as a stop, like the English "g" in "gun" (voiced velar stop/plosive), not like the palatal affricative English "g" in "ginger, which is like the "j" in "jump" (a "dj" or "dzh"). | The picture of a loaf, this is a "t" (voiceless dental or alveolar stop/plosive). | The picture of a tethering rope, this is simple a "t" in Coptic, and has turned into a "t" in many Middle Egyptian words, but is thought to have been pronounced like the "ch" in English "church" earlier (voiceless palato-aveolar affricative). **tsh** would be good for transcription. | The picture of a hand, this is a "d" (voiced dental or alveolar stop/plosive). | The picture of a snake, this has become a "d" or a "t" in Coptic, but is thought to have been a "j" as in the English "jump" earlier (voiced palato-aveolar affricative). It can correspond to a "j" (*jîm*) in Arabic. Thus, for the Arabic root **mlj**, "to suck" or "suckle," we find [mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/mndj.gif](http://www.friesian.com/notes/note-o.htm), "breast," in Old Egyptian. This had already become simply **mnd** in Middle Egyptian. |

Since not everyone studying Egyptian, or even reading it professionally, wants to tangle with the problems of restoring its pronunciation, two convenient devices have been adopted:

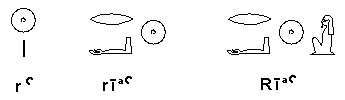
1. Add "e's" where necessary. Thus, **khpr** gets pronounced as **kheper**, and **nfr** gets pronounced as **nefer**.
2. Since few non-Arabists have occasion to learn to pronounce **3** and **9**, just pretend they are the vowel "a." So **r9**, the sun or the sun god, Rê, gets pronounced **ra**. In context, this is unobjectionable, but as people have gradually gotten the idea that **r9** *was really pronounced* **ra**, Alan Gardiner's own warning might be repeated (his italics):

*But it must never be forgotten that the vocalizations thus provided are purely artificial makeshifts and bear little or no relation, so far as the vowels are concerned, to the unknown original pronunciations as heard and spoken by the Egyptians themselves.* [p. 28]

Some words, of course, can be restored. For an example, one of the names of Amenhotep III was **Nbm39tr9** (a tongue-twister if there ever was one), meaning "Rê is the Lord of Truth." But we have the whole name in Akkadian from the Amarna archive: **Nimmuarîa** or **Nibmuarîa**. For the first word, "lord," mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/NB.gif, the vowel is clearly an "i," **nib**. The second word is an important word to the Egyptians, **m39t**, "truth" and "justice." **Mua** raises a couple of questions: Where is the "t"? And where does the "a" go? The "t" is the feminine ending for a noun. In two related languages, Hebrew and Arabic, this is also the case; but for both of them the "t" is *usually not pronounced* in the singular. The same thing seems to have happened in Egyptian. The verb **m39** is usually written with the interesting glyph mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/M39.gif, which is a combination of a pictogram for "sickle," **m3**, with an obscure glyph that turns it into the phonogram **m39**. This is rather like what happened with Chinese characters, though the device advanced no further in hieroglyphics.

The noun **m39t** is written with the glyph , which originally was a pictogram for "feather," **shwy**, then became a phonogram **shw** as in **Shw**, the god of the air, "Shu." The feather is then used for an ideogram or generic determinative in one writing of **m39t** as , and finally becomes an ideogram in . The feather was evidently the symbol of the *goddess* **M39t**, and her image always made for a determinative or ideogram in an alternate writing, . The word **m39t** is often written as **Maat** with the vocalization convention mentioned above. Now, however, we can see that the main vowel was a "u," and, from the information about syllable structure in Coptic, we can say that the "a" is the vowel of the feminine ending, without the t. So the full vocalization for Late Egyptian was [**mu39a**](http://www.friesian.com/sounds/mu39a.wav).

Egyptian may seem more guttural than the reader expects, but that is characteristic of the group of languages to which Egyptian belongs. Only Arabic still preserves all the sounds, but even Hebrew still *writes them* in the traditional spelling.

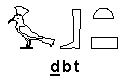
The last part of Amenhotep III's name is the name of the sun god, **R9**. **R9** itself we know from Coptic as mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/re-copt.gif, i.e. *Rê* in Greek [[note](http://www.friesian.com/egypt.htm" \l "note)]. This comes out in Akkadian as **Rîa**. Thus the central vowel is a long "i." It is the general impression that long "e's" in Coptic come from long "i's" in Egyptian. The Akkadian version doesn't show us the *'ayn*, but it does throw in an extra "a." Such an "a," however, is a familiar phenomenon from Hebrew and Arabic. Guttural consonants are hard to pronounce at the end of words. The word "Messiah" in Hebrew is actually written as though it were pronounced **Mâshîcha**, but this is a convention to indicate that it is really pronounced [**Mâshîach**](http://www.friesian.com/sounds/mashiakh.wav), with the "a" inserted to ease the transition from the long "i" to the "ch." No such writings occur in Arabic, but in spoken Arabic it is clear that a transitional "a" is frequently inserted in words like **rûh.**, "spirit," or the imperative verb "go!" That comes out as [**rûah.**](http://www.friesian.com/sounds/ruuhh.wav). Egyptian certainly did the same thing. **Rî9** would have been difficult enough to pronounce that it became [**Rîa9**](http://www.friesian.com/sounds/riia9.wav) in speech, which is what got picked up in the Akkadian transcription. The accompanying diagram shows the difference between an ideographic and a phonetic writing for **r9**. Note that the difference between the word **rî9** meaning "sun" and **Rî9** meaning the "sun god" is the generic determinative for "god."

The Egyptian pronunciation of **Rîa9** may seem difficult and strange. It then may be interesting to note that an important name from Hebrew would have posed similar difficulties. ***Jesus*** in Hebrew would have been [**Yêshûa9**](http://www.friesian.com/sounds/yeshua9.wav), from the root **ysh9**, "to be saved, helped, victorious." The *'ayn*, indeed, may have no longer been pronounced in Jesus's day. Where it *would* be pronounced, in Arabic, a curious thing has happened: Although the original form of the name is preserved, as [**Yasû9**](http://www.friesian.com/sounds/yasu9.wav), the name occurs much more commonly with the *'ayn* transposed to the front, as [**9îsâ**](http://www.friesian.com/sounds/9isa.wav). This is certainly easier to pronounce, though why the change occurred in this word and not in others is a good question.

Another example of vocalization we might consider is the word "Pharaoh." This comes from Hebrew, **Par9ôh**. In Egyptian we find **pr93**, which means "Great House." The glyph mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/93.gifmeans "great," and means "house." This became a synonym for the king about the time of Akhenaton. Saying "The Great House" did such and such would be equivalent of saying today that "the Palace said" or "the White House said," in referring to the actions of a monarch or the American President. With Hebrew as the evidence, we could say that **pr93** would have been vocalized [**par9ô3**](http://www.friesian.com/sounds/par9o3.wav) in Late Egyptian.

Finally, let me mention an Egyptian word that ended up as a part of [California](http://www.friesian.com/ross/calif.htm) history.

When I was a child and visited the nearby old California mission at [San Fernando](http://www.friesian.com/ross/ross-8.htm#visiting), I was impressed how cool it was in the summer with its thick adobe walls. Later I discovered that adobe wasn't always used in such missions. All the missions in San Antonio, Texas, five or more, were built of the plentiful Texas limestone. Several California missions, like Carmel and Santa Barbara, also ended up with stone churches. Actually, neither adobe nor stone are the best things for earthquake country like California -- they are brittle materials and result in the sudden collapse of structures. But at least repairing earthquake damage to adobe might be easier than repairing cut stone:  The great stone church at San Juan Capistrano still is a ruin from its collapse in the earthquake of 1812.

Now, "adobe" is the Spanish word for mud brick. There is a folk etymology for this in Spain, but it actually seems to have been borrowed from the Arabic word [](http://www.friesian.com/sounds/attub.wav), "the mud brick." Spanish has quite a few words from Arabic whose origins don't often get acknowledged. Spanish words that begin with "al" are always suspicious, but in this case the word in Arabic begins with a "sun letter" ("t."), which means that it assimilates the pronunciation of the "l". But *'at.t.ûb*, is not ultimately from Arabic:  It was itself borrowed from Coptic, which has the word mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/djbt-c.gif, "mud brick"; and, as we might expect, the Coptic word is ultimately from the Middle Egyptian word for mud brick, , with a phonogram for **db** and an ideographic determinative for "brick".

Thus, looking at the California missions, we use the same word for the same objects that the Egyptians commanded the Israelites to make for the palaces of Pharaoh.

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[Index of Egyptian History](http://www.friesian.com/notes/oldking.htm)

[The Egyptian Soul](http://www.friesian.com/soul.htm#egypt)

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**The Pronunciation of Ancient Egyptian, Note**

There is now some controversy about the pronunciation of Coptic. Coptic died out as a primary spoken language in the 15th century. Most classical Coptic literature was written in the Sahidic dialect, and when that is taught today (e.g. Thomas O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Sahidic Coptic*, Mercer University Press, 1983, 1988), a sort of compromise "academic" pronunciation, partially based on the academic pronunciation of Greek, is used. In those terms, mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/eta.gif, Greek Eta, is pronounced like a long *ê* in Italian or Spanish (q.v. Lambdin, p.xi), or French *é*. Similarly, mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/epsilon.gif, Greek Epsilon, is pronounced like French *è* or the short English *e* in "bet." However, it is a matter of general agreement in the study of Classical Greek that the *quality* of the vowels Eta and Epsilon was actually the opposite of this. Eta was literally the "long" vowel in taking longer to pronounce, but its quality was the "open" vowel of French *è* and English "bet." Epsilon, in turn, although "short" in quantity, was pronounced with the "close" vowel of French *é* and English "bay" (cf. William Watson Goodwin & Charles Burton Gulick, *Greek Grammar*, Blaidsdell Publishing Company, 1930, 1958, pp.6 & 9-10; and Herbert Weir Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, Harvard University Press, 1966, pp. 12-13). In modern Greek, Epsilon now has the "open" pronunciation, while Eta, Ypsilon (Classical *ü* as in German), and Iota are all pronounced like the *i* in English or French "police," i.e. assimilated to Iota. As Coptic began to be written in the Greek alphabet, these sound changes in Greek were already beginning to occur, and there is already the occasional confusion between Eta and Iota, Eta and Ypsilon (cf. Lambdin p.xvii).

The Sahidic dialectic of Coptic came to be replaced as a literary language by the Bohairic dialect, beginning in the 9th century and culminating in the adoption of Bohairic as the liturgical language of the Coptic Church in the 11th century. Sahidic is generally thought to have been a dialect of Upper Egypt, Bohairic of Lower Egypt, or the Western Delta. When Coptic died out as a primary spoken language, this meant that (1) the liturgical language, Bohairic, remained the only living spoken form of Coptic, and (2) even people learning the liturgical language would have Arabic as their first language, which could gradually introduce an Arabic phonological bias into Coptic, i.e. people raised speaking Arabic might naturally pronounce Coptic as Arabic, without realizing that there was going to be a difference. On top of this, in the 19th century we get a "reform" of the proununciation that introduces a bias from another language, namely Modern Greek.

In the time of the Coptic [Patriarch Kirellos (Cyril) IV](http://www.friesian.com/popes.htm" \l "coptic) (1854–1861), there were negotiations to unify the Coptic and the Egyptian [Melkite Church](http://www.friesian.com/popes.htm#melkite), i.e. the Church in doctrinal communion with the [Patriarch of Constantinople](http://www.friesian.com/popes.htm#constantinople), from which the Coptic Church had split in 460 AD over disagreement about the [Fourth Ecumenical Council](http://www.friesian.com/hist-1.htm#mono). This unification did not come about, but the affair curiously inspired a movement to use Modern Greek pronunciation instead of the traditional Bohairic pronunciation. The project was begun by Arian G. Moftah, who taught Coptic for the Patriarchate; and it was subsequently pursued by the authority of the Coptic Church. By the mid-20th century the result was that the "Greco-Bohairic" pronunciation was used quite generally and the older, indigenous pronunciation all but forgotten.

It was not long before people began to think better of this strange business and wished to recover the "Old Bohairic" pronunciation -- just at the point where evidence was disappearing rapidly over what that pronunciation had been. There was still some living memory, from elderly Copts and isolated churches, of what the pronunciation was. The current Patriarch, Shenouda III, at the time Abba Shenouda, encouraged Emile Maher to study the evidence for the old pronunciation, and from various sources he produced (in 1968) a system of "Old Bohairic" pronunciation, which is now being promoted for the Coptic Church.

An interesting result in this system is that the Eta and Epsilon are both taken to be pronounced *æ*, as in English "bat" (indeed, the a-e ligature, æ, was borrowed into the International Pronunciation Alphabet from Old English) -- though the Eta could also be pronounced *i* (as noted with Sahidic above). Now, *æ* is not a sound that occurs in every language. It is present in Modern English, Arabic, and Persian, but not, for instance, in French, German, Italian, or Spanish. There is no particuar reason to doubt that *æ* was the pronunciation of Epsilon and Eta in Coptic at the time of the Greco-Coptic "reform," but there is good reason to wonder if this was the pronunciation before the effect of phonetic bias introduced by the dominance of Arabic. The evidence, indeed, for the pronunciation is from transcriptions of Arabic and from living speakers whose first language, of course, is Arabic.

One of the most interesting types of evidence for the pronunciation of Coptic are lists of words in Arabic transcribed into Coptic that were used to aid Copts in learning Arabic, at the time when Arabic was becoming the primary spoken language. The long â in Arabic, whose quality in Modern Arabic is *æ*, is frequently written as Eta, Epsilon, or even two Epsilons in Coptic. The two Epsilons are perhaps used to represent the fact the long â in Arabic is also long in *quantity*, i.e. takes longer to say, as with the long vowels in Classical Greek. These transcriptions, however, are not evidence that Eta and Epsilon were actually pronounced *æ*, but only that the represented the *closest sound* to that in Arabic. We get a similar problem when Arabic *w* is transcribed as mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/beta.gif, Greek Beta, in Coptic. As in Mediaeval Greek, mhtml:file://C:\Users\bakir\Desktop\The%20Pronunciation%20of%20Ancient%20Egyptian.mht!http://www.friesian.com/images/hiero/beta.gifprobably was pronounced as a *v*, or alternatively a *b*. However, although Arabic *w* turns up as *v* in Persian and Turkish, I know of no dialect of Arabic where it is pronounced that way. As with the Eta, the "Old Bohairic" interpretation takes the Arabic equivalent literally and reads Beta as *w* (or *b*). It is odd, on the other hand, that Coptic did have its own way of writing *w*, as **OY**, which was the Greek way of writing a long *û* and is still a device used in French to write *w*. As seen the text above, **OY** does occur in Coptic where there was a *w* in Egyptian. Somehow, the Arabic *w* struck the Coptic ear as more like *v* than like **OY**.

Of course, we can imagine that Coptic *already* had *æ* and did *not* have a *v*, and that it was adapting the best *Greek* letters to its own phonology. The difficulty I find with that possibility is the fact that Coptic was perfectly ready to preserve letters from Demotic, the latest form of the writing of Ancient Egyptian, to write sounds that were not in Greek. There are five or six of these used in traditional Coptic. Thus, my suspicion is that while Eta and Epsilon may have been pronounced *æ*, and Beta *w*, in the 19th Century, these are effects of the influence of Arabic. People at first learned Arabic with an equivalent Coptic pronunciation (with *è* for *æ*), but then, as time went on, they got Arabic phonology right but then began reading Coptic with it (with *æ* for *è*). In fact, I wonder if something of the sort may have been in mind at the time of the Greco-Coptic "reform." I wonder if Arian G. Moftah realized that he was teaching Coptic with Arabic phonology and thought that even a Modern Greek equivalent, although anachronistic, would be preferable. Anyone promoting the "Old Bohairic" pronunciation might pause to consider that.

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