

The British
Museum



Talk like an EGYPTIAN



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What are hieroglyphs?

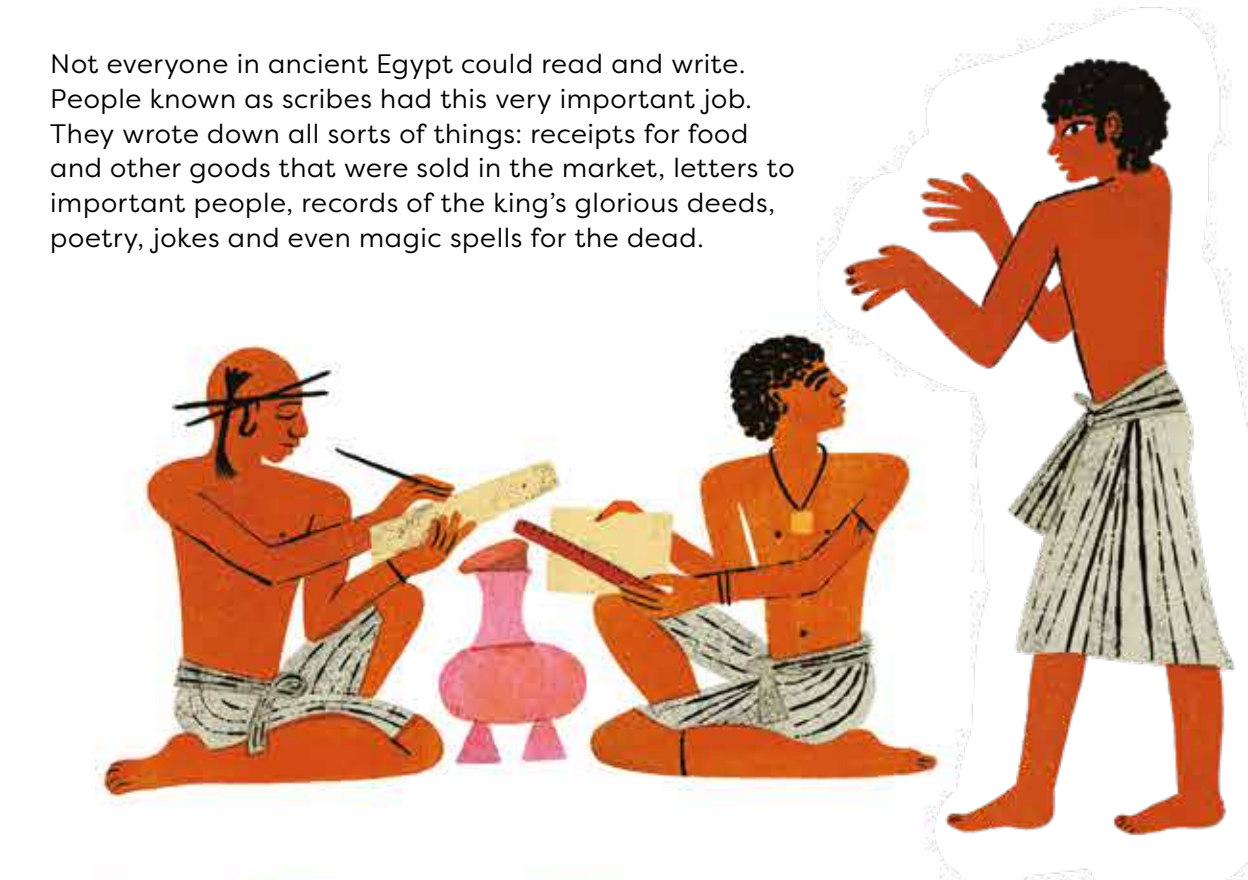
**Have you ever written something in another language?
What about a language that uses pictures instead of letters?**

Hieroglyphs are a picture language that was used between 2,000 and 5,000 years ago by people who lived in ancient Egypt. Instead of using an alphabet of letters, like the words written in English on this page, the ancient Egyptians drew birds, snakes, hillsides, body parts and many other picture signs, to turn the words they spoke into writing.

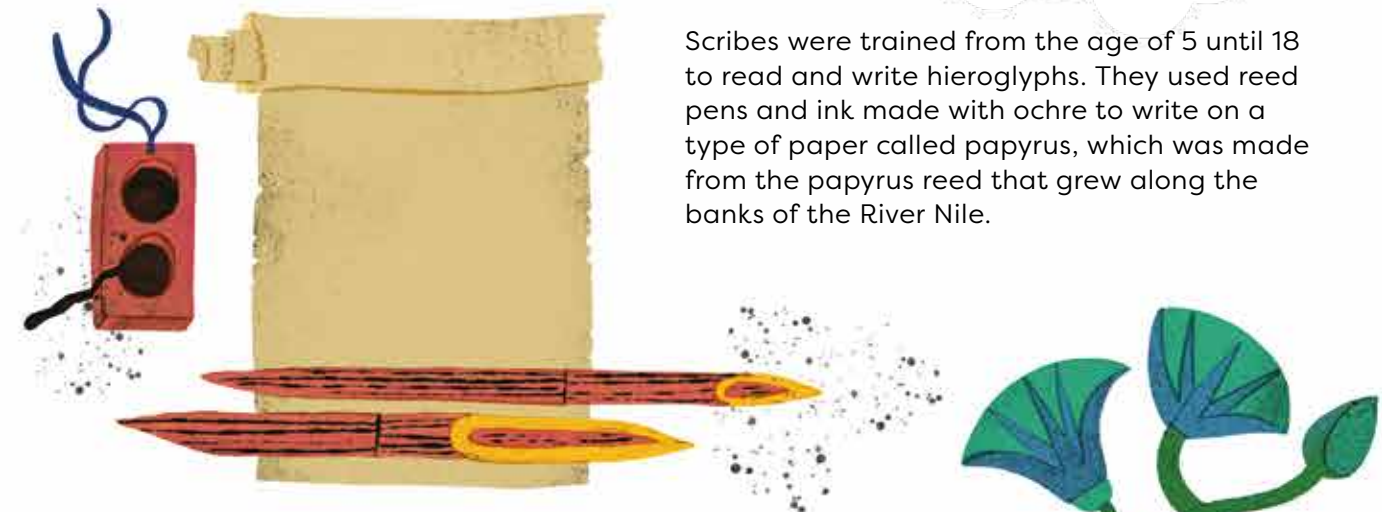


The signs could stand for letters, words, ideas or numbers, and some symbols even had more than one meaning. While the alphabet we use to write in English has 26 letters, the ancient Egyptians had around 900 different picture signs!

Not everyone in ancient Egypt could read and write. People known as scribes had this very important job. They wrote down all sorts of things: receipts for food and other goods that were sold in the market, letters to important people, records of the king's glorious deeds, poetry, jokes and even magic spells for the dead.



Scribes were trained from the age of 5 until 18 to read and write hieroglyphs. They used reed pens and ink made with ochre to write on a type of paper called papyrus, which was made from the papyrus reed that grew along the banks of the River Nile.

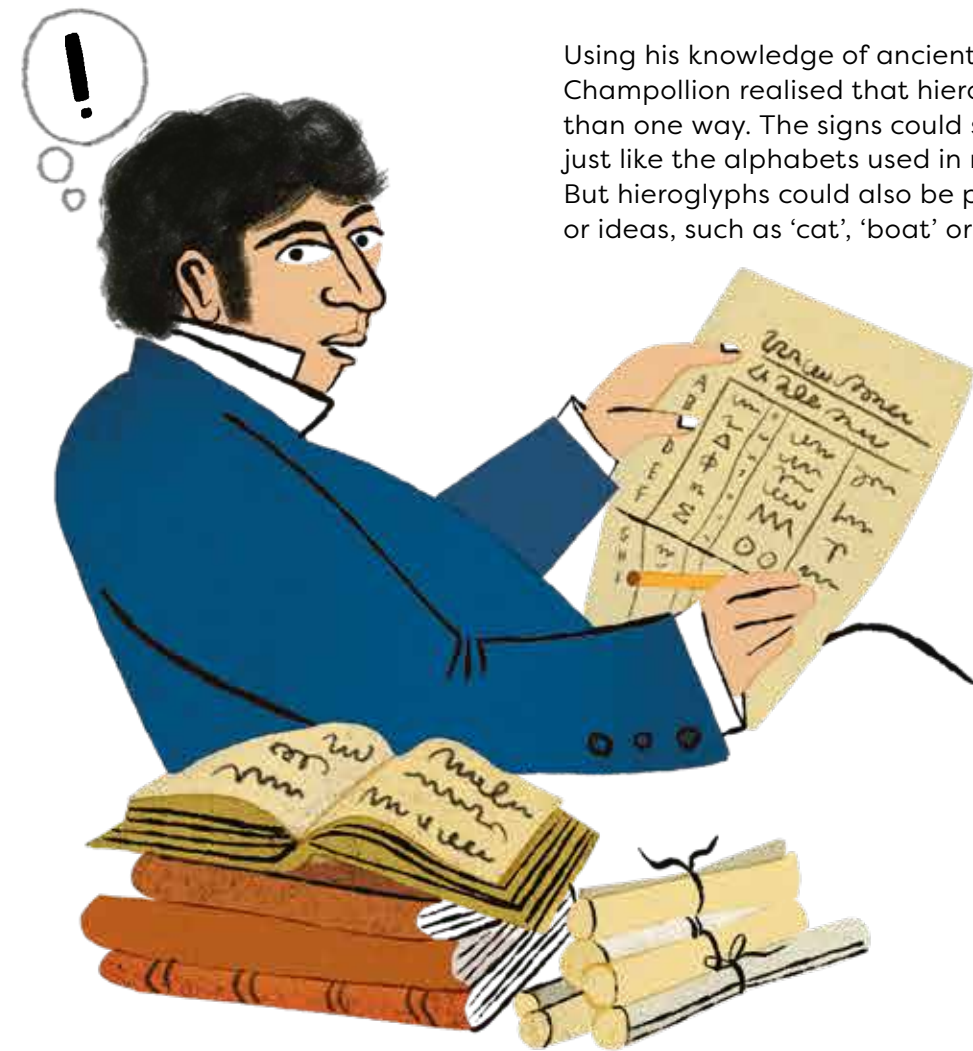
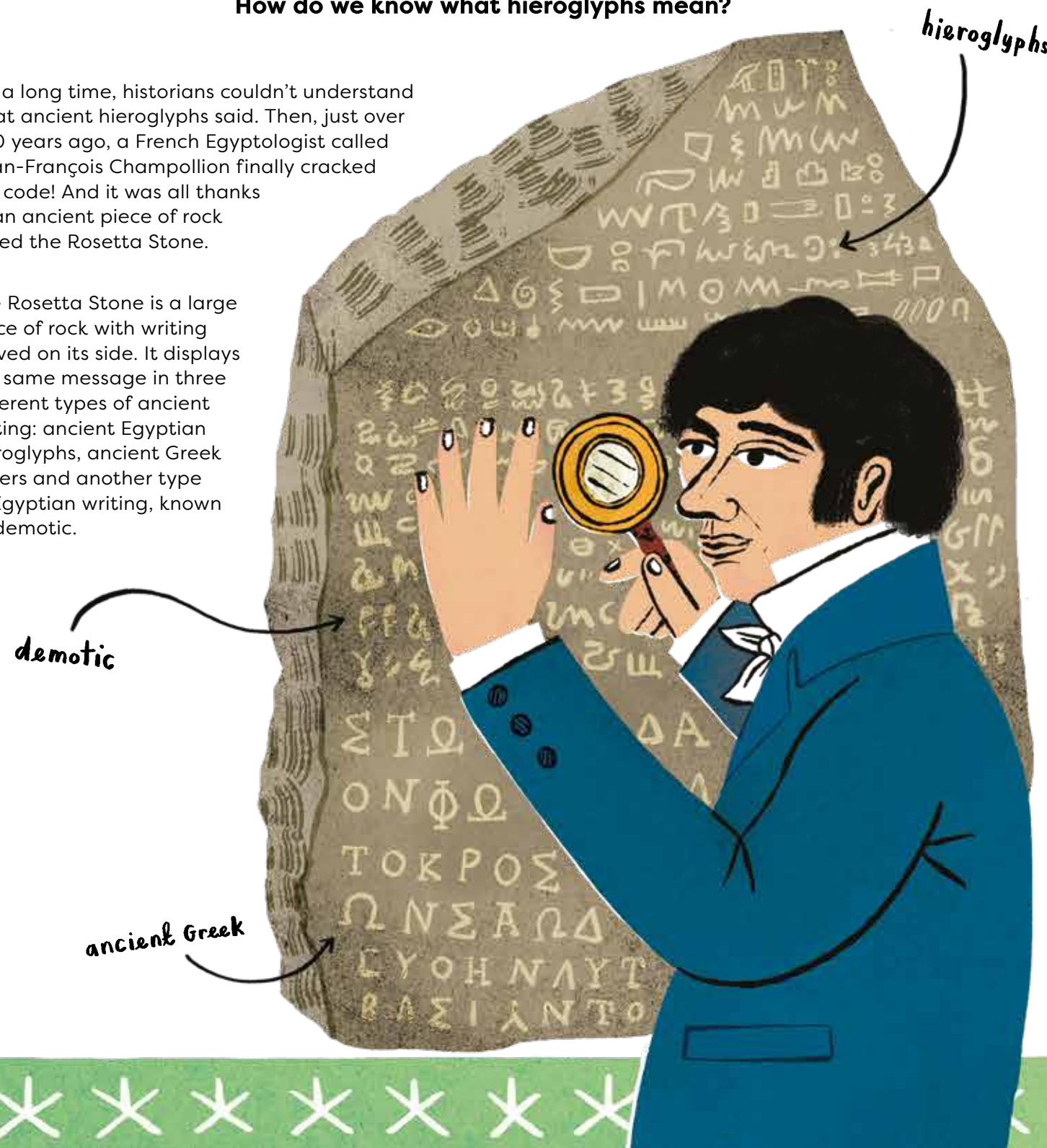


Cracking the code!

How do we know what hieroglyphs mean?

For a long time, historians couldn't understand what ancient hieroglyphs said. Then, just over 200 years ago, a French Egyptologist called Jean-François Champollion finally cracked the code! And it was all thanks to an ancient piece of rock called the Rosetta Stone.

The Rosetta Stone is a large piece of rock with writing carved on its side. It displays the same message in three different types of ancient writing: ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, ancient Greek letters and another type of Egyptian writing, known as demotic.



Using his knowledge of ancient Greek writing, Jean-François Champollion realised that hieroglyph symbols could work in more than one way. The signs could stand for sounds such as 'ah' and 'ee', just like the alphabets used in many places around the world today. But hieroglyphs could also be picture clues to stand for entire words or ideas, such as 'cat', 'boat' or 'soldier'.

When Champollion finally deciphered the Rosetta Stone, he rushed into his brother's room, shouted "Look! I've got it!", then collapsed on the floor.

Since then, we have been able to read ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs discovered in tombs and on temple walls, scraps of papyrus and pieces of pottery. We've found poems, sums, scientific documents and royal records. And each new piece of writing helps us to learn more about the mysterious world of ancient Egypt...

