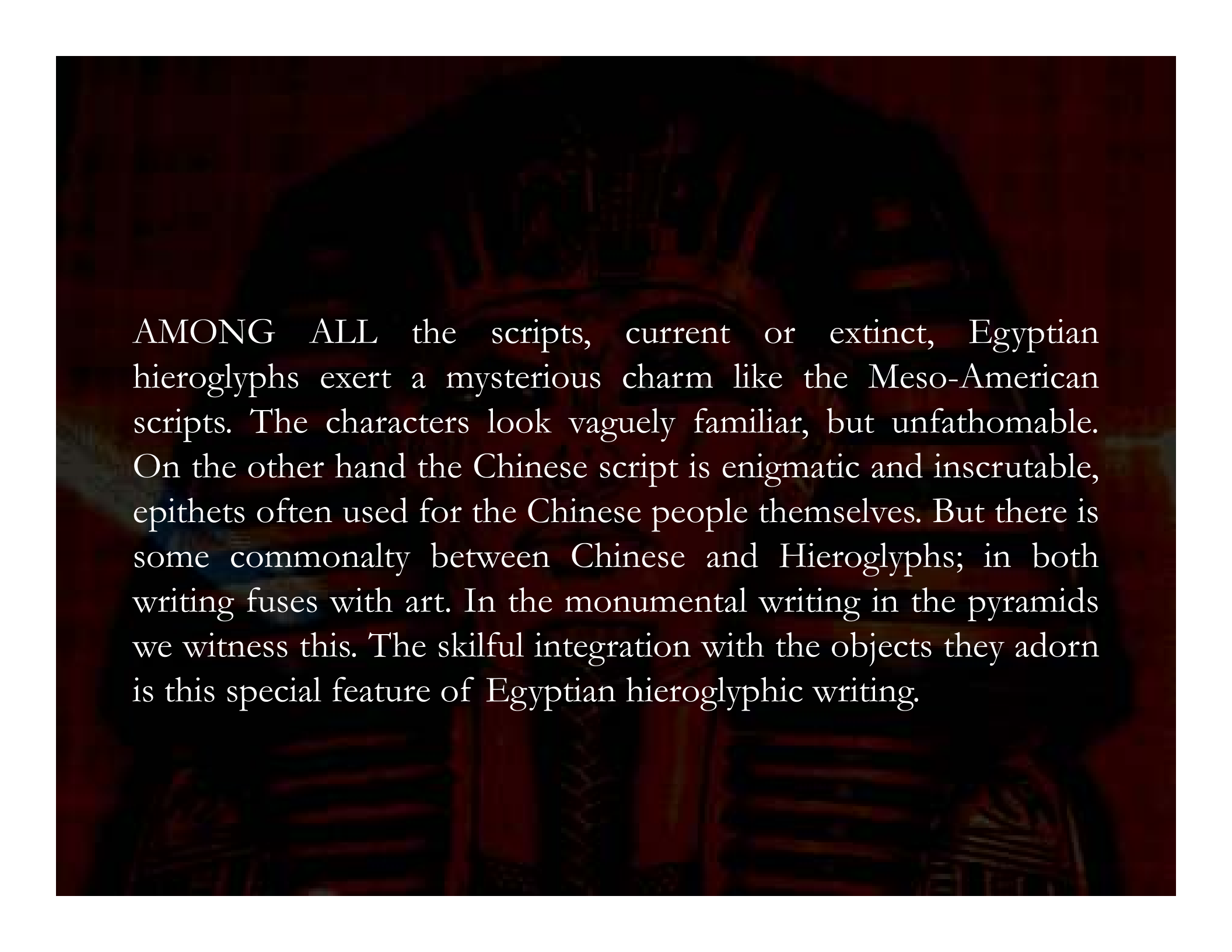
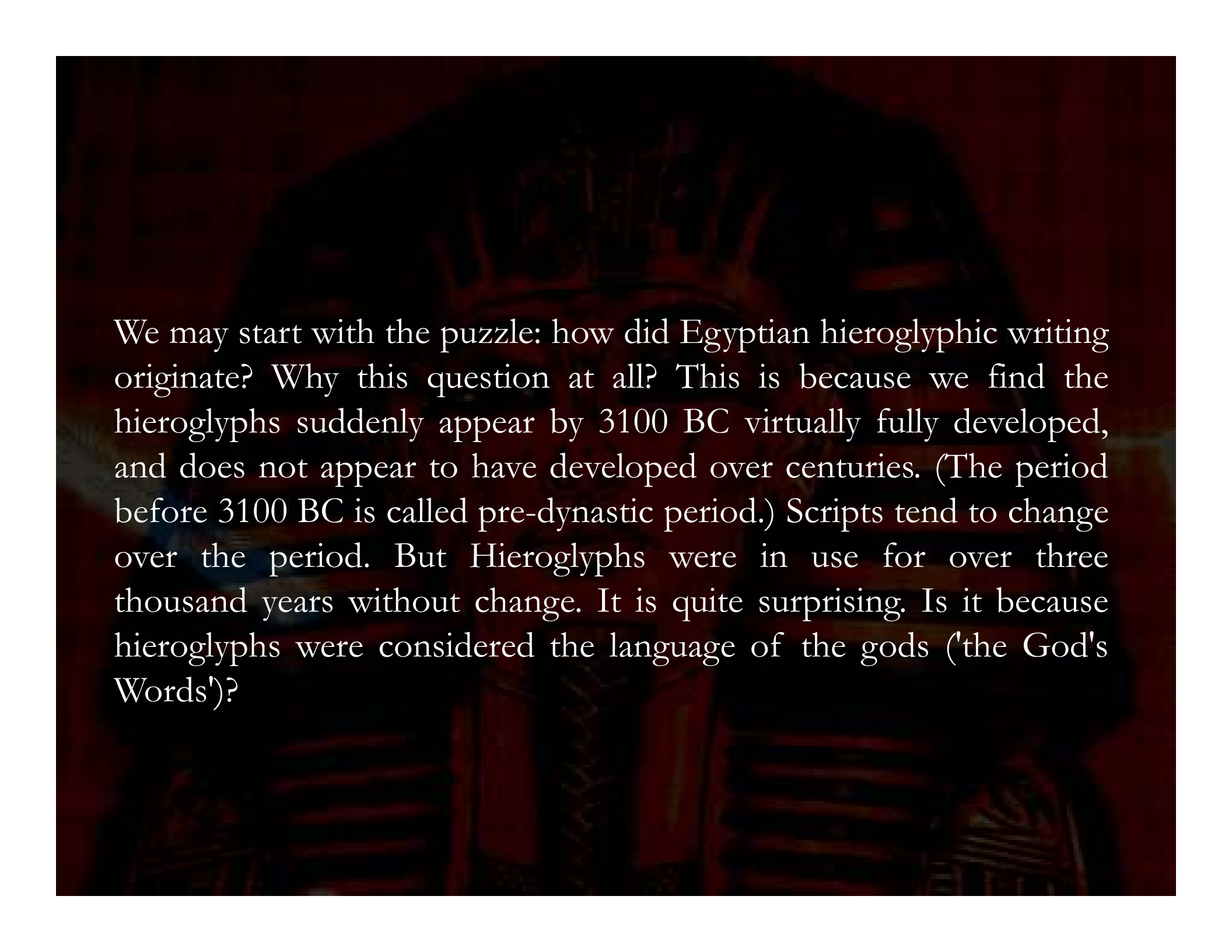




*Appreciating
Egyptian Hieroglyphs
“The words of God”*



AMONG ALL the scripts, current or extinct, Egyptian hieroglyphs exert a mysterious charm like the Meso-American scripts. The characters look vaguely familiar, but unfathomable. On the other hand the Chinese script is enigmatic and inscrutable, epithets often used for the Chinese people themselves. But there is some commonalty between Chinese and Hieroglyphs; in both writing fuses with art. In the monumental writing in the pyramids we witness this. The skilful integration with the objects they adorn is this special feature of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing.



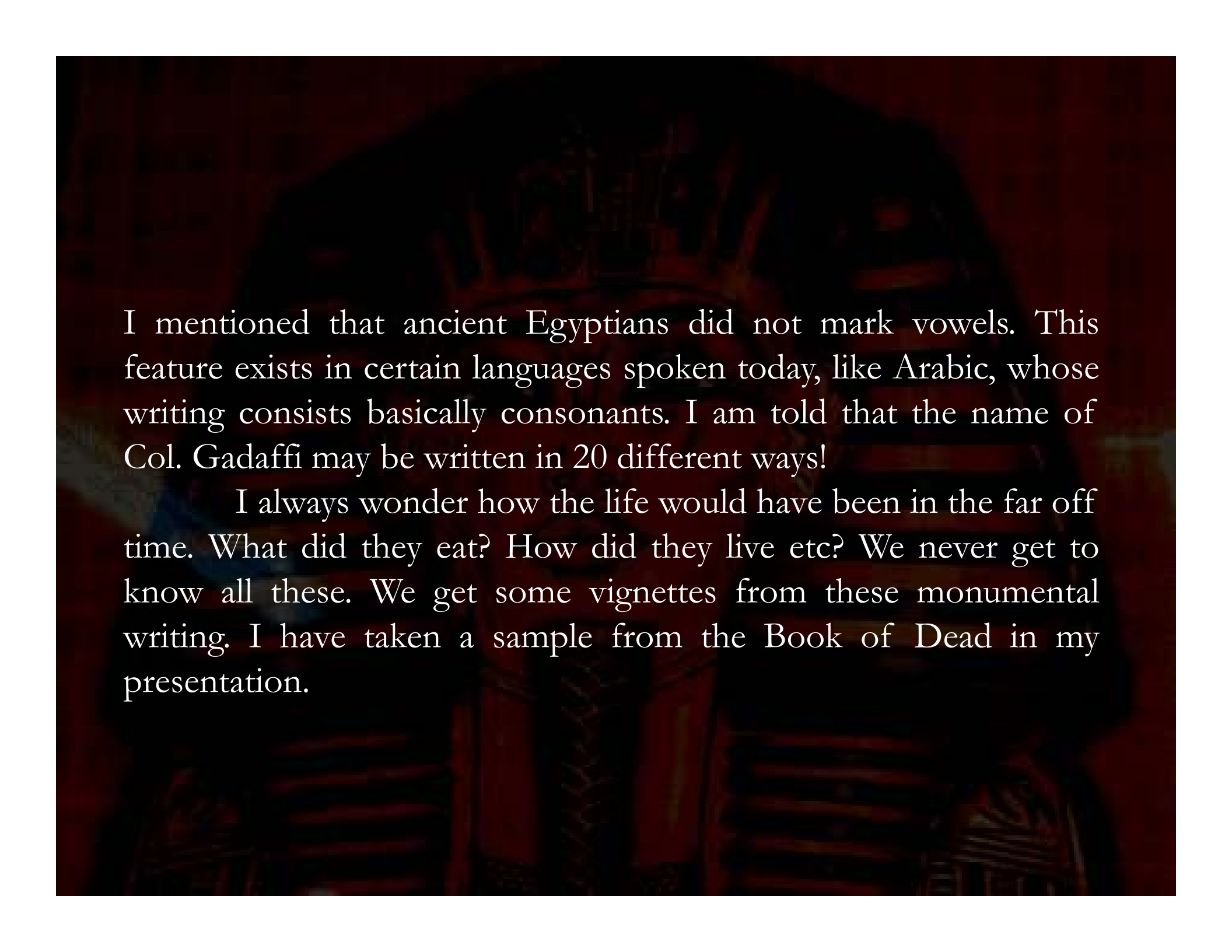
We may start with the puzzle: how did Egyptian hieroglyphic writing originate? Why this question at all? This is because we find the hieroglyphs suddenly appear by 3100 BC virtually fully developed, and does not appear to have developed over centuries. (The period before 3100 BC is called pre-dynastic period.) Scripts tend to change over the period. But Hieroglyphs were in use for over three thousand years without change. It is quite surprising. Is it because hieroglyphs were considered the language of the gods ('the God's Words')?

What about Sumeria influencing Egypt? Sumeria is close by and had developed a script a few centuries before, 3300 BC, to be specific. May be the idea of writing diffused into Egypt. However, many researchers feel, the Egyptian might have stumbled on phonetic principle independently. This is because there are differences between early Egyptian and Sumerian pictograms.

The original script, called 'hieroglyphic, gave rise to two cursive scripts. The first was 'hieratic' almost from the time of 'invention' of hieroglyphs. The second 'demotic' came into use from about 650 BC. The latter became the vehicle for common use, pushing hieratic only for the use of the priestly class.

Now let us consider the script proper. Most hieroglyphic signs are consonants. Vowels were taken for granted. Today we seem to have deciphered, but have no clue about the pronunciation. A script consisting of consonants only? The confusion does not stop here, for some signs may represent more than one consonant; there are bi-consonants and even tri-consonants! To confound the same symbol could be mono- or multi-consonants. You will appreciate this when you go through my presentation.

From hind-sight we may wonder, why they made the script more complicated than required. This can happen to natural languages. The unnecessary baggage acquired over centuries cannot be thrown overboard. Even in English we still continue with 'night', right etc, while 'gh' became silent quite some ago. (In German these are 'nacht' and 'richt' respectively and 'ch' is pronounced.) And for the same reason we have not replaced 'thru' for 'through'.



I mentioned that ancient Egyptians did not mark vowels. This feature exists in certain languages spoken today, like Arabic, whose writing consists basically consonants. I am told that the name of Col. Gadaffi may be written in 20 different ways!

I always wonder how the life would have been in the far off time. What did they eat? How did they live etc? We never get to know all these. We get some vignettes from these monumental writing. I have taken a sample from the Book of Dead in my presentation.

But such monumental writing is not about common people. The following short pieces, for example, tell us that the common man's attitude to life was not too different from ours today. For example, see how a teacher chides his pupil: 'I know that you frequently abandon your studies and whirl around in pleasure, that you wander from street to street and every house stinks of beer when you leave it ... You, boy! You don't listen when I speak! You are thicker than a tall obelisk 100 cubits high and 10 cubits wide.'

In another place a father gives advantages of white-collar job. He advises him to be diligent in the school if he is to avoid a life of back-breaking manual labour: 'I have seen the smith at his work besides his furnace,' the father declares. 'His fingers are like crocodile skin, and he stinks worse than fish roe.' World has not changed much in these 5000 years!

We have an ongoing debate whether we, Indians, lack a sense of history, whether we have a scientific temper, etc. These questions arise because it is felt that the Westerners seem to possess these. Here is an incident from history. During his Egyptian campaign Napoleon had brought with him between nearly 1000 civilians including 167 scientists, technicians, mathematicians and artists who studied the art, architecture, and culture of Egypt during their 'extended vacation'. The night before the battle he exhorted his troops "Soldiers, from the tops of these pyramids, forty centuries are looking down at you." From 1809-1828, these 'civilians' published a 19-volume work called *Description of Egypt*. Their observations, drawings and illustrations were circulated throughout Europe and created a tremendous interest in antiquities of Egypt.

It is in this campaign that the Rosetta Stone was found by his soldiers that helped in the deciphering the hieroglyphic script. I have discussed in some detail Rosetta Stone and the Frenchman, Champollion, who finally decoded. What I have not included is the very clue to the unravelling. This clue was in the writing proper names. This had to be done phonetically. (Late you will find in my section on the Chinese writing how hilarious it could be to write foreign names in a language which lack phonetic symbols.) It was found that proper names of persons were written within a border, called *cartouche*. For example, the Greek names Ptolomy and Cleopatra, which had no Egyptian equivalent, and had to be spelt phonetically. Here they are. On the top we have the name in hieroglyphs and below in Roman letter



The chap, Chompollion, himself was a very remarkable fellow. If you want to know more about this inspiring person, let me know I will give lead.

Ancient Egyptian Writing



In the 4th century AD

all the pagan religious places in Egypt
were closed by the Byzantine Empire.

This brought down the curtain
on the 4000-year old tradition of Egypt
and its message.

Ancient Egyptian Writing



For the next 1500 years,
the Ancient Egyptian civilization
was known only through
its magnificent pyramids and sculptures.

Egyptian, one among the oldest languages,
remained frozen on the walls of the pyramids.

Hieroglyphic Writing



Burial Chamber of Rameses II

The picture-like symbols found all over the walls of pyramids form the script, called Hieroglyphs (about 3100 BC-400 AD), literally meaning Sacred Writing.

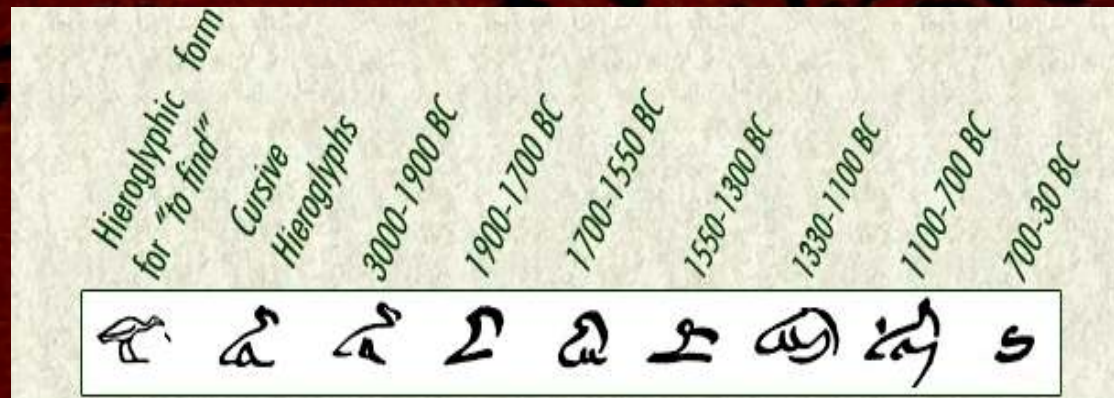
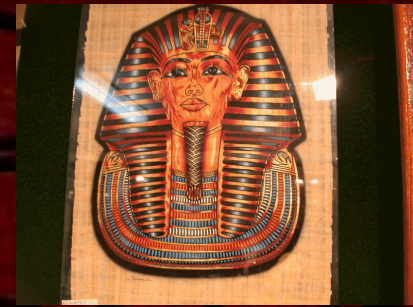
This script was used mostly for formal inscriptions, and mainly found on stone, pottery and ivory.

Hieroglyphic Script



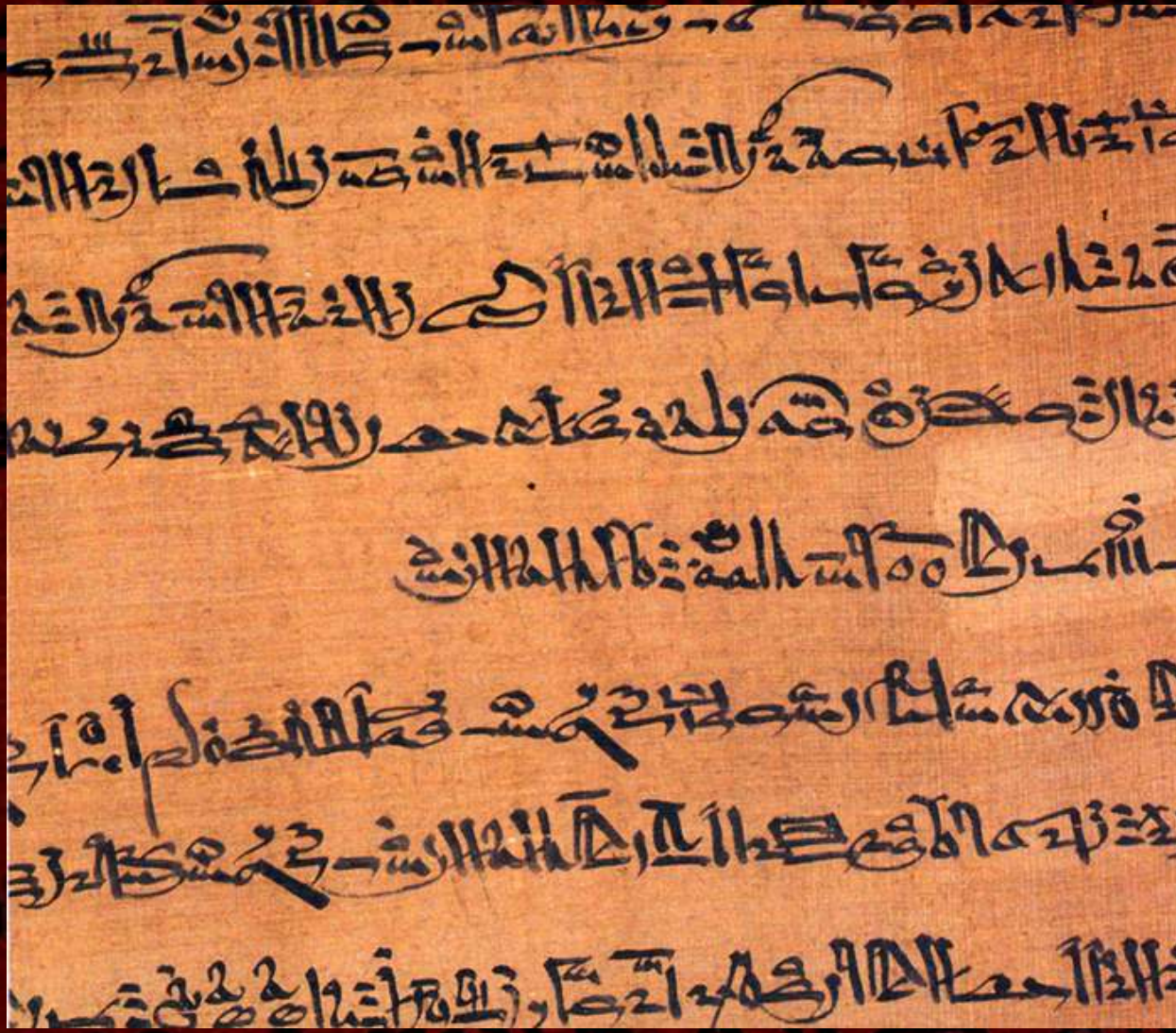
Hieratic Script

But, for conducting day to day business there was another script, known as Hieratic (upto about 650 BC), a simplified style, for administration, literary work etc.



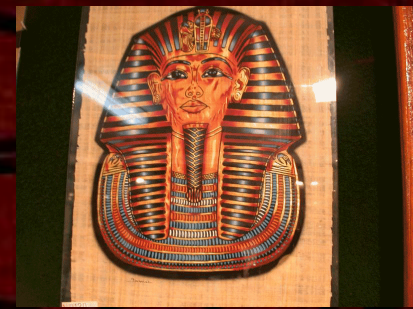
This was a handwriting script, in which the picture signs were abbreviated to abstraction, done on papyrus, in black ink with a reed.

Hieratic Script



The image displays a section of a papyrus scroll with Hieratic script. The script is a cursive form of Egyptian hieroglyphs, characterized by its fluid, connected characters. The text is arranged in approximately ten horizontal lines. The scroll itself is light brown and shows signs of age, with some fraying at the edges. The background of the entire image is a dark red color, overlaid with a faint, repeating pattern of the Hieratic script. A decorative border with stylized hieroglyphs runs along the top and bottom edges of the scroll.

Demotic Script



Demotic (about 650 BC- 450 AD),
was yet another more simplified script
for day-to-day work.

This script was known to the 19th century Egyptologists,
and gave the clue
to the ultimate decipherment of Hieroglyphs.



Deciphering Hieroglyphs

The mystery of the language and unravelling the secrets of the dead in the pyramids had to wait till a determined researcher, Jean-Francois Champollion (1790-1832) arrived on the scene, again, fortuitously, armed with a multi-lingual inscription, on Rosetta Stone.

Today, we know more about Egyptian society than most other ancient cultures.

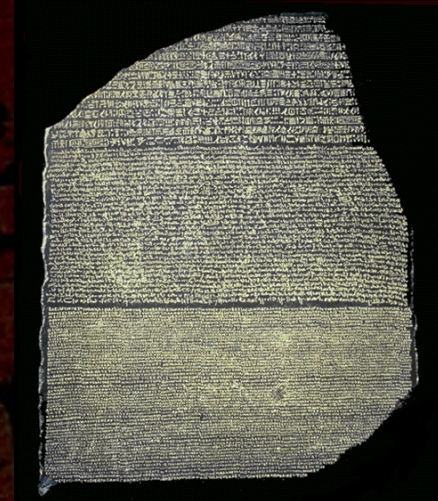
Rosetta Stone

In 1799, in a fort in Rosetta, Egypt,
was found a large black stone
with inscriptions
in three different languages.

One of them was Greek; the others were
Demotic and Hieroglyphic.

Greek and Demotic could be read and
the text was found identical in both the languages.

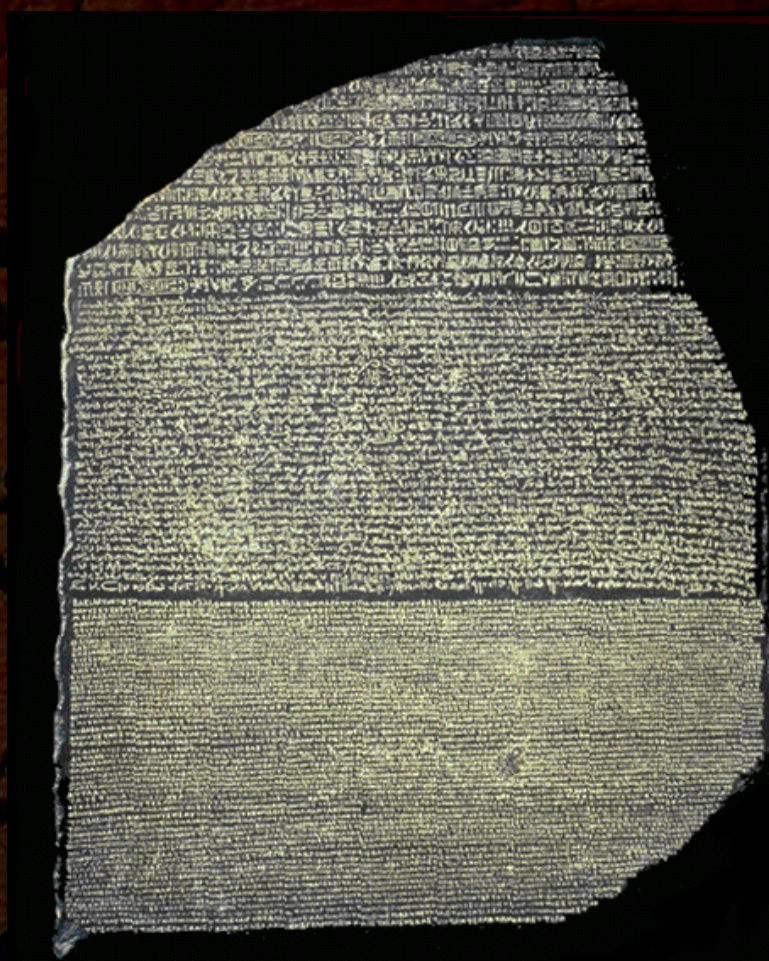
It stood to reason that the Egyptian hieroglyphs
also contained the same text.



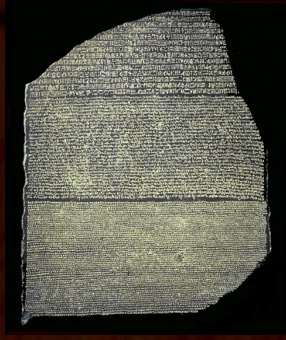
Rosetta Stone

Rosetta Stone,
presently in
the British Museum,
London

Finally, Jean François Champollion,
could decode the Hieroglyphs in 1822.



Rosetta Stone



The Rosetta Stone is written
by Egyptian priests to honour the pharaoh.
It lists the good deeds of the pharaoh.

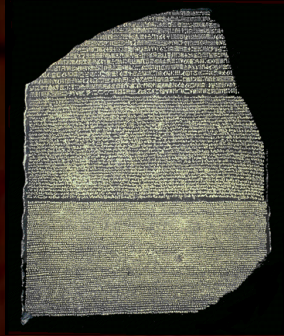
Let us have a sample



Rosetta Stone

*“When the Nile made a great rise
in the eighth year of his reign,
which usually floods the plains,
he prevented it,
by damming at many points
the outlets of the channels
spending upon this
no small amount of money,
and setting cavalry and infantry
to guard them,*

Rosetta Stone



*"He has been renewing
the most honourable of the temples
during his reign,
as is becoming;
in requital of which things
the gods have given him health,
victory and power,
and all other good things,
and he and his children
shall retain the kingship for all time."*

Picture-signs of Hieroglyphic Writing

Hieroglyphic writing is like a picture puzzle.
The ancient Egyptian writing used
over 2,000 hieroglyphic characters.



Hieroglyphic Signs

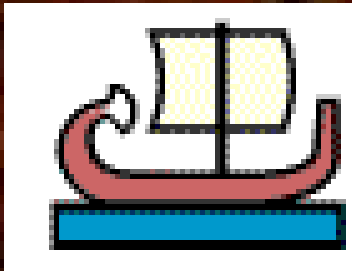


- Each Hieroglyphic sign is a picture
and may be any one of the following three:
- an object or
 an idea connected with the object
 - a phonetic symbol
 - a determinative

Hieroglyphic Signs

Ideograms

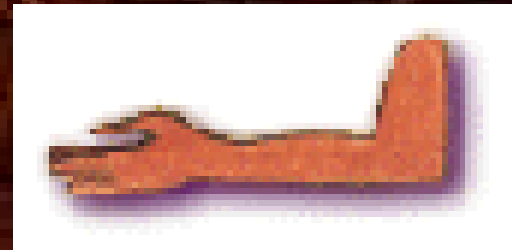
Firstly, picture may represent the object of the picture or an idea associated with that object.



ship



owl

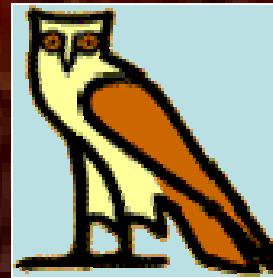


arm, action

Hieroglyphic Signs

Phonetic Symbols

The word for owl started with the sound m, and the ideogram for owl



came to represent the consonant m also












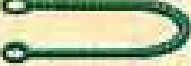



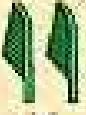






This is like 'apple' for 'a', 'boy' for 'b' etc.

Thus a picture could be an alphabetic sign too

Hieroglyphic Signs

Phonetic Symbols

We can, then, construct a table of alphabet

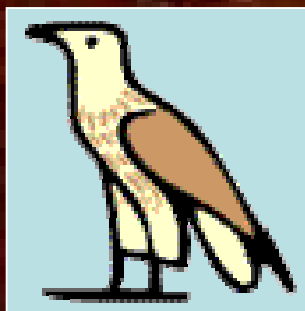
 A	 B	 W O	 K H	 K	 N
 H	 I	 G	 P	 F	 T H
 M	 S	 J	 Y	 S H	
 D	 Q	 R	 T	 L	

Hieroglyphic Signs

Syllabic Signs

To complicate the matter,
some pictures may also represent
two or more consonants

For example,



this sign may represent two consonants gm,
which are independently



g

and

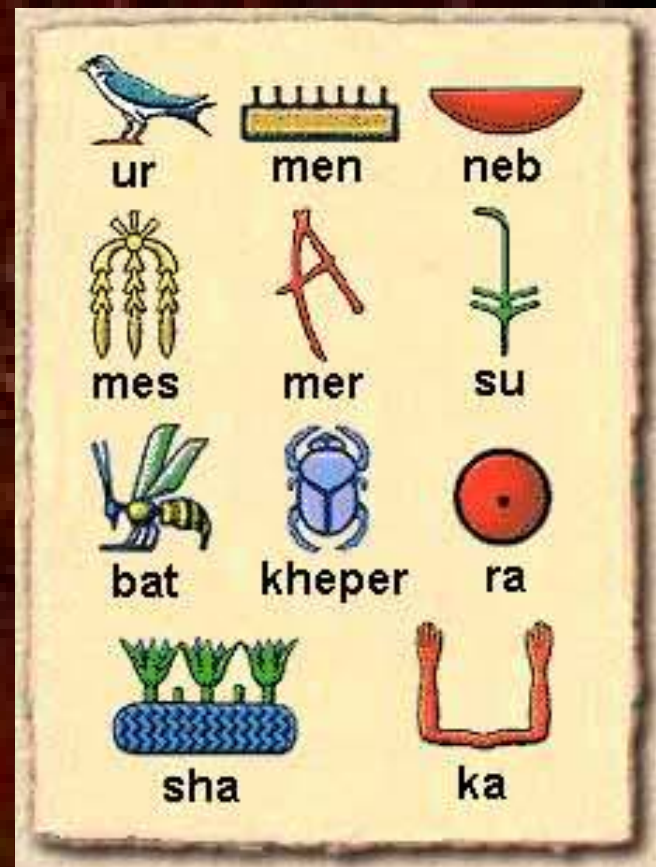


m

Hieroglyphic Signs

Syllabic Signs

Here are
a few such syllabic signs

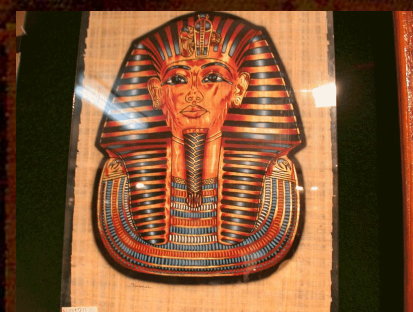


Picture Puzzle ...

It would be confusing to have signs having different representations.

Further, unfortunately, the Egyptians took most vowels for granted and did not represent them, and the signs were all consonants.

Here is an example to show how this could be confusing, and how the Egyptians solved it.



... to Solution

Suppose I want to write two words freight and fort.
Omitting vowels, the consonants are same for both,
namely, F - R - T and would be written as

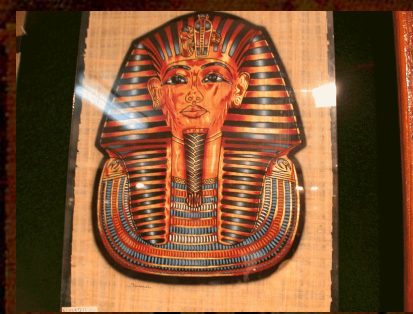


A sign was added at the end to suggest the meaning.



Hieroglyphic Signs

Determinatives

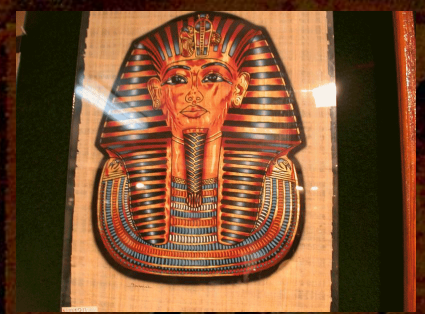


The last sign that was added suggesting the meaning is called determinative the third function of a sign.

Hieroglyphic Signs

We may recollect that Cuneiform writing also exhibited these features:

ideogram
alphabet
determinative.



Sign Grouping

There are two special features of this script to suit the requirement of monumental writing. One is called Sign Grouping.

For example, the word freight may be written as:



Or the gaps may be filled to look more balanced, like



Writing Convention

Hieroglyphic writing can be written in columns or rows.

It could be from left-to-right or right-to-left, the reading direction determined by the direction figures faced.

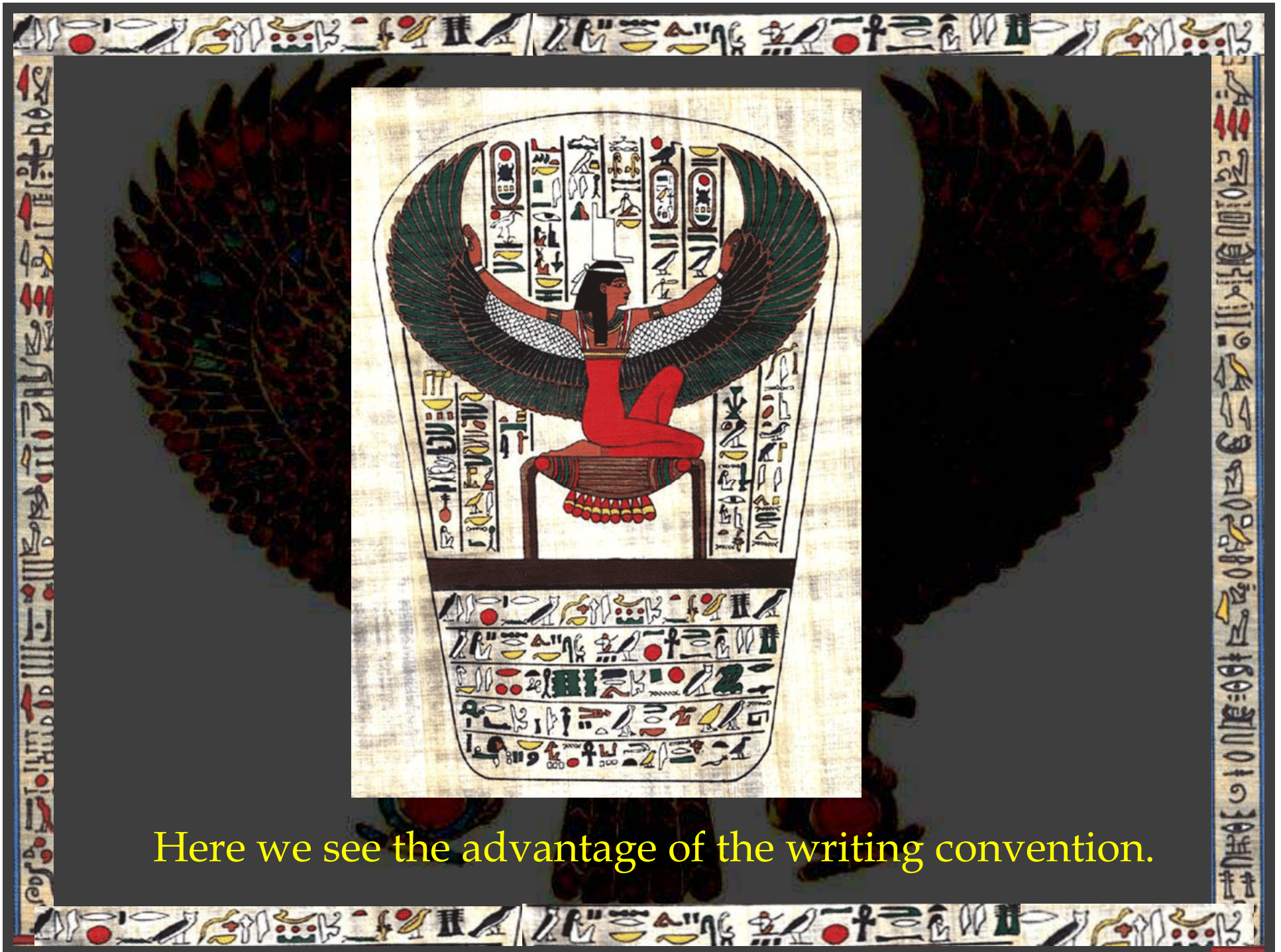
Left-to-right



Right-to-left



Top-to-bottom



Here we see the advantage of the writing convention.

The Book of Dead



The Books of the Dead contain religious spells written and illustrated on rolls of papyrus, stored in the tomb of the deceased.

They are thought to ensure happiness in the next world.

We shall take a page as illustration.

The Book of Dead

The dead man,
called Pawiaenadja,
is on the right.

He is pouring water on
offerings upon an altar.

On the left is
the god Osiris,
recipient of the
offerings.

On the top is the
legend.



The Book of Dead

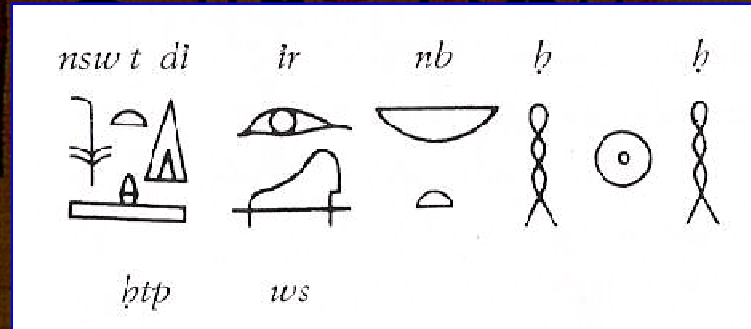


The legend translates some what like this:

*"An offering which the king gives to Osiris,
lord of eternity, the great god, foremost of the West,
that he may give a good burial
to the god's father of Amun-Re, king of gods,
Pawiaenadja, true of voice."*



This line is enlarged and letters identified

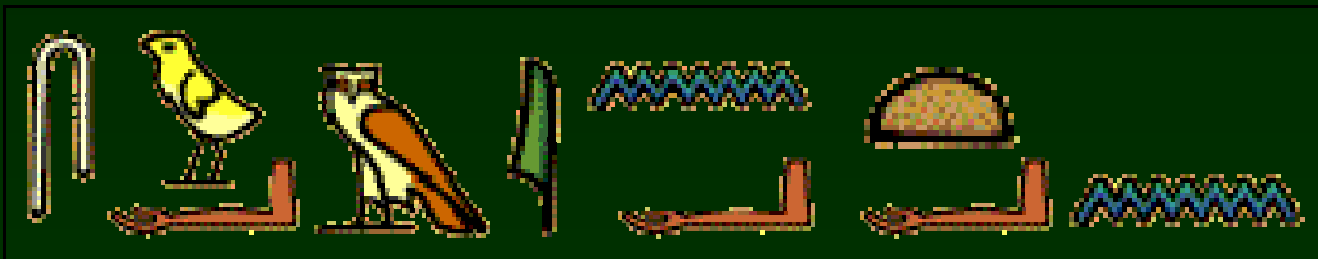


This is transliterated as *htp-di-nswt ws-ir nb (n)h-h*.

It means:

'An offering, which the king gives to Osiris, lord of eternity'.

Finally, let me write my name,
SWAMINATHAN
in Hieroglyphs



And, if I were a pharaoh it
would be in a cartouche



The background of the slide is a photograph of an ancient Egyptian wall painting. It features a central scene with two dark silhouettes of figures, possibly a man and a woman, in a dynamic pose. The wall is covered in hieroglyphs, with a prominent vertical column of large characters behind the figures. The entire scene is framed by a decorative border consisting of repeating hieroglyphic motifs in a light color against a darker background.

The Egyptian Hieroglyphs exert a mysterious charm.

The monumental writing is a fusion with art.

The skilful integration with the objects they adorn is a special feature of this script.

The writing suddenly appears in the fully completed state 5000 years ago and remains unchanged for 3000 years.

Is it because hieroglyphs were considered 'the God's Words'?