
Hieroglyphics – Solution

by Tom Payne, based on research by Jean-François Champollion¹
(<http://www.math.bas.bg/ml/iad/dremat/dmathen.html>)

The following are representations of two Egyptian "cartouches" from the Greco-Roman period. A cartouche is an oblong set of hieroglyphic characters that represent a name, a word or a phrase. One of these cartouches represents the name of the Queen "Cleopatra." Your task is to figure out which one means "Cleopatra," and what the other one probably means (Hint: the other cartouche is the name of another famous character from Ancient Egyptian history). This is exactly the kind of work that archeological linguists do when they attempt to interpret writings in ancient languages.



Be sure to explain your reasoning in detail. Good luck!

Solution: The bottom one means "Cleopatra" and the top one means "Ptolemy." Each symbol refers to a sound (or "letter"). I guessed the bottom one was "Cleopatra" because there are nine symbols that could correspond to the nine letters in "Cleopatra." It might have been written right-to-left or left-to-right. So I tried both. It has to be left to right because there are two "eagle" symbols on the right side, and there are two "a" sounds toward the end of the name "Cleopatra." Then by comparing the sounds in the word and the symbols in the cartouche, this hypothesis is supported. The first two symbols (starting from the left), arranged vertically must represent "C" and "l". The next four represent "e" "o" "p" and then the first "a". Finally, the next two arranged vertically represent "t" and "r", and then comes the final "a". Applying this knowledge to the first hieroglyph, we get "p" with a "t" below, then an "o", then "l" then "e" and then two unknown sounds. However, the hint that this must be the name of another famous character from Ancient Egyptian history, helped me guess that the last two symbols must represent "m" and "y" to form the name "Ptolemy."

¹ Sometimes called "the father of Egyptology," French linguist Jean François Champollion (1790-1832) pioneered decipherment of the ancient scripts of Egypt, thereby making full study of that nation's early history and culture possible.

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