

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Reading Passage: History

Grade 6

SOURCE: The Story of Mankind by Hendrik Van Loon

## HIEROGLYPHICS

### THE EGYPTIANS INVENT THE ART OF WRITING AND THE RECORD OF HISTORY BEGINS

THESE earliest ancestors of ours who lived in the great European wilderness were rapidly learning many new things. It is safe to say that in due course of time they would have given up the ways of **savages** and would have developed a civilisation of their own. But suddenly there came an end to their **isolation**. They were discovered.

A traveller from an unknown southland who had dared to cross the sea and the high mountain passes had found his way to the wild people of the European continent. He came from Africa. His home was in Egypt.

The valley of the Nile had developed a high stage of civilisation thousands of years before the people of the west had dreamed of the possibilities of a fork or a wheel or a house. And we shall therefore leave our great-great-grandfathers in their caves, while we visit the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean, where stood the earliest school of the human race.

The Egyptians have taught us many things. They were excellent farmers. They knew all about **irrigation**. They built temples which were afterwards copied by the Greeks and which served as the earliest models for the churches in which we worship nowadays. They had invented a calendar which proved such a useful instrument for the purpose of measuring time that it has survived with a few changes until today. But most important of all, the Egyptians had learned how to preserve speech for the benefit of future generations. They had invented the art of writing.

We are so **accustomed** to newspapers and books and magazines that we take it for granted that the world has always been able to read and write. As a matter of fact, writing, the most important of all inventions, is quite new. Without written documents we would be like cats and dogs, who can only teach their kittens and their puppies a few simple things and who, because they cannot write, possess no way in which they can make use of the experience of those **generations** of cats and dogs that have gone before.

In the first century before our era, when the Romans came to Egypt, they found the valley full of strange little pictures which seemed to have something to do with the

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history of the country. But the Romans were not interested in "anything foreign" and did not inquire into the origin of these queer figures which covered the walls of the temples and the walls of the palaces and endless reams of flat sheets made out of the papyrus reed. The last of the Egyptian priests who had understood the holy art of making such pictures had died several years before. Egypt deprived of its independence had become a store-house filled with important historical documents which no one could **decipher** and which were of no earthly use to either man or beast.

Seventeen centuries went by and Egypt remained a land of mystery. But in the year 1798 a French general by the name of Bonaparte happened to visit eastern Africa to prepare for an attack upon the British Indian Colonies. He did not get beyond the Nile, and his campaign was a failure. But, quite accidentally, the famous French expedition solved the problem of the ancient Egyptian picture-language.

One day a young French officer, much bored by the dreary life of his little fortress on the Rosetta river (a mouth of the Nile) decided to spend a few idle hours **rummaging** among the ruins of the Nile Delta. And behold! he found a stone which greatly puzzled him. Like everything else in Egypt it was covered with little figures. But this particular slab of black basalt was different from anything that had ever been discovered. It carried three inscriptions. One of these was in Greek. The Greek language was known. "All that is necessary," so he reasoned, "is to compare the Greek text with the Egyptian figures, and they will at once tell their secrets."

The plan sounded simple enough but it took more than twenty years to solve the riddle. In the year 1802 a French professor by the name of Champollion began to compare the Greek and the Egyptian texts of the famous Rosetta stone. In the year 1823 he announced that he had discovered the meaning of fourteen little figures. A short time later he died from overwork, but the main principles of Egyptian writing had become known. Today the story of the valley of the Nile is better known to us than the story of the Mississippi River. We possess a written record which covers four thousand years of chronicled history.

As the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics (the word means "sacred writing") have played such a very great role in history, (a few of them in modified form have even found their way into our own alphabet,) you ought to know something about the ingenious system which was used fifty centuries ago to preserve the spoken word for the benefit of the coming generations.

Of course, you know what a sign language is. Every Indian story of our western plains has a chapter devoted to strange messages written in the form of little pictures which tell how many buffaloes were killed and how many hunters there were in a certain party. As a rule it is not difficult to understand the meaning of such messages.

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Ancient Egyptian, however, was not a sign language. The clever people of the Nile had passed beyond that stage long before. Their pictures meant a great deal more than the object which they represented, as I shall try to explain to you now.

Suppose that you were Champollion, and that you were examining a stack of **papyrus** sheets, all covered with hieroglyphics. Suddenly you came across a picture of a man with a saw. "Very well," you would say, "that means of course that a farmer went out to cut down a tree." Then you take another papyrus. It tells the story of a queen who had died at the age of eighty-two. In the midst of a sentence appears the picture of the man with the saw. Queens of eighty-two do not handle saws. The picture therefore must mean something else. But what?

That is the riddle which the Frenchman finally solved. He discovered that the Egyptians were the first to use what we now call "**phonetic** writing"—a system of characters which reproduce the "sound" (or phone) of the spoken word and which make it possible for us to translate all our spoken words into a written form, with the help of only a few dots and dashes and **pothooks**.



Let us return for a moment to the little fellow with the saw. The word "saw" either means a certain tool which you will find in a carpenter's shop, or it means the past tense of the verb "to see."

This is what had happened to the word during the course of centuries. First of all it had meant only the particular tool which it represented. Then that meaning had been lost and it had become the past participle of a verb. After several hundred years, the

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Egyptians lost sight of both these meanings and the picture {illust.} came to stand for a single letter, the letter S. A short sentence will show you what I mean. Here is a modern English sentence as it would have been written in hieroglyphics. {illust.}

The {illust.} either means one of these two round objects in your head, which allow you to see or it means "I," the person who is talking.

A {illust.} is either an insect which gathers honey, or it represents the verb "to be" which means to exist. Again, it may be the first part of a verb like "be-come" or "be-have." In this particular instance it is followed by {illust.} which means a "leaf" or "leave" or "lieve" (the sound of all three words is the same).

The "eye" you know all about.

Finally you get the picture of a {illust.}. It is a giraffe It is part of the old sign-language out of which the hieroglyphics developed.

You can now read that sentence without much difficulty.

"I believe I saw a giraffe."

Having invented this system the Egyptians developed it during thousands of years until they could write anything they wanted, and they used these "canned words" to send messages to friends, to keep business accounts and to keep a record of the history of their country, that future generations might benefit by the mistakes of the past.

### Discussion Questions

Record the answers for these questions in your journal notebook.

#### A. READ TO UNDERSTAND.

*Complete the following summary of the passage with suitable words from the help box.*

civilisation    deciphered    interpretation    recorded    writing

The Egyptians have contributed much to our modern \_\_\_\_\_. They were the first to discover the art of \_\_\_\_\_. They \_\_\_\_\_ their development and understanding of farming, building, and time. For thousands of years Egyptian historical documents could not be \_\_\_\_\_ until a French officer found the Rosseta stone in the Nile Delta. However, it was in 1823 when A French professor, Champollion, announced the \_\_\_\_\_ of fourteen of the figures.

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**B. FIND THE MEANING OF THE FOLLOWING WORDS:**

**isolation, irrigation, savages, accustomed, generations, decipher, rummaging, phonetic, pothooks, papyrus**

**C. RESEARCH QUESTIONS:**

1. Where is Egypt?
2. On a map, find the following: the Rosetta river, the Nile, and the Nile Delta.
3. What is hieroglyphics?

**D. ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS.**

1. Name four things that Egypt contributed to the development of world civilisation.
2. Where can we find the first records of human history?
3. Where did the Romans find the many strange little pictures?
4. Why did the Romans consider Egypt's historical documents useless?
5. Where was the General Bonaparte going? Why was he going there? And what did he encounter when he got as far as the Nile?
6. What did the French officer find in the Nile Delta and what was different about it?
7. Who and how long did it take to decipher the slab found in the Nile Delta?
8. How did the ancient Egyptians send messages to friends?

**E. DISCUSS**

1. What was unique Egypt?
2. Why is writing considered the most important invention of all?
3. Why was Egypt considered a land of mystery?