

Episode 1

Bex: Welcome to the first episode of the Nile Chronicles, the actual first episode. Now, this episode is all about multilingualism, what it is, what languages we know existed in ancient Egypt to some level. And for starters, I'm going to look at some of the scholarship and contrary to my belief, I thought there was actually going to be a lot about the ancient Egyptian language as we've known a lot about ancient Egypt and we've been able to translate hieroglyphics for some time now. But when I started really looking into it, there wasn't a lot that actually came back. Which was really interesting to me. I was like, I guess there's not a lot of people that are solely interested in just the ancient Egyptian language and nothing else. So, to not only my benefit, but also your benefit as a listener. In 2013 there was a book that was published by James Peter Allen. Who is an American Egyptologist, and he published a book titled *The Ancient Egyptian Language, A Historical Study*, which is really fantastic. It's a really great book. I haven't made my way all the way through it. But one of these days I definitely will. And then in 1983, so previously, John Baines, who is a British Egyptologist, published a book called *Literacy and Ancient Egyptian Society*.

Now, I'll be touching back on Baines when I talk about literacy rates as well as the role of scribes. But I wanted to note that both Baines and Allen have a very similar timeline. And there is a timeline associated with this episode that you can find others under the documents tab on my webpage. Because I am speaking out all of these dates is going to get very confusing. So, a timeline would be helpful to look at. In order to establish what time period, we are in history. So, without further ado, I'm actually going to start with neither Baines nor Allen. I'm going to start with an article by Griffith. Now, Griffith's article actually is one of my favorites because it's called *The System of Writing in Ancient Egypt*, and he just talks about how hieroglyphics were used, why they were used, what they looked like, and he gives really good examples of this.

And for starters, my favorite thing that he writes is that he says the writing is made up of ideographic and phonetic elements. In other words, the pictures appeal in a sense both to the eye and to the ear. And I really think that's beautiful. Uh, cause when you think about a language, that's exactly what you want. You want something that sounds elegant. You want something that looks really good. And that's why a lot of people actually gravitate towards those romance languages. Like Spanish, Italian, French, you know them. And I think it's very interesting that he describes ancient Egyptian as this way because it's all just symbols. Not necessarily letters because it's a very phonetic language and it's mostly consonants. So, the ancient Egyptian language, their alphabet, only had about twenty-five letters. And like I said, there were very few vowels, which is interesting. So, speaking the language would have... Would have been interesting to hear, and I know there are, there is at least one YouTube video out there about, or there's a guy that speaks in ancient

Egyptian, and I think it's really cool. And I think, you know, if you have the time, go check it out. I'll link it to my page. But anyway, there's also word signs that he talks about. And in ancient Egyptian... In ancient Egyptian, when you're talking about using symbols for letters, Things get a little bit messy and Griffith points this out and he says, they sought clearness and definition, not in simplicity but by multiplying checks on error. And more or less, they achieved their purpose, but the results were extremely cumbersome. So, for one word, their word for craze is three phonetic symbols followed by a determinate Determinative of speech at the end. And then in another instance, there's another word that is for phonetic signs.

And People are lazy, scribes were lazy, and when they were writing these pictorial symbols, they kind of looked messy and not as good. Which got really confusing for translators. So, I'm actually going to put some of the examples that Griffith writes on my page as well, just because I think what he says is very interesting. Or if you want to pull up the article yourself, if you have access to it, I'm looking specifically at page 156. When he's talking about word signs and the use of proper names and everything. So. Griffith also says this, by the time of the sixth dynasty, long texts were commonly written and inscribed, and in the Middle Kingdom, the Egyptian hieroglyphic system had assumed its most perfect shape for clearness and neatness. Apart from certain aristocratic rivals or lapses into vulgar modes, this was the form which henceforth served as the model for monumental spelling. And I'm going to pause there. He says that this form of hieroglyphics that came about during the Middle Kingdom, and we call that Middle Egyptian, it was the perfect style for monumental inscriptions.

Now monumental inscriptions mean inscriptions that were written on monuments. We see them on obelisks, we see them in tombs, we see them on cartouches, we see them everywhere. You can imagine any monument; it has the Middle Egyptian writing script. And this script was not really used for personal letters that I will be discussing later. However, he continues. There were, of course, periods of decline during which writing suffered much. Monumental hieroglyphs being at a discount, the origins of the signs were forgotten, but periods of prosperity by reviving the demand for decoration Restored the art of hieroglyphic writing nearly to the height from which it had fallen. And this is exactly what Allen talks about when he talks about his history of the ancient Egyptian language. He talks about how Middle Egyptian existed and it was great. Everybody loved it. But then it died. But then it came back to life under a certain pharaoh whose name escapes me at the moment. But Middle Egyptian experienced a language death, and yet it came back, but it was only seen on monumental inscriptions, which I think is very interesting. And it's kind of what we think about dead languages today, or quote-unquote dead languages. How can we see their influence on modern languages, but the language itself as the way that it was written is no longer spoken. And that's what happened in the Middle Egyptian, which is very interesting, in my opinion. Now, another source I want to

look at, specifically, I'm just going to pull some quotes because I find it really interesting, it is a source, I'm pulling up now. Called the Multilingual Experience in Ancient Egypt. Now, this was one of the ones that I immediately... Immediately found. It's the one that popped up the most. So, it's called the multilingual experience in Egypt from the Ptolemies to the Abbas, Abbasids? My apologies if I'm pronouncing any of these wrong. I am in fact doing my best. And I specifically love this one quote from it towards the end on page three.

An introduction and it says, even though it had an ancient and prestigious local language that was unequivocally associated with power, successive invaders who established their rule there for varying periods brought their own language of power with them and used it in their administration of the country. And we see this in the Roman imperial period specifically. Latin never really took off in ancient Egypt. And it was really only spoken in the administrative roles in those ivory tower roles. Ivory tower positions such as military, political, and economic positions, which I find really interesting. So as much as I have talked about multilingualism in ancient Egypt, I do want to say one thing from this source because it points it out and I haven't found another source that does. And there's a section in it called separation between the Greek and Egyptian cultural spheres. And it says the fact that Greek was introduced by conquerors and became the language of power gave rise to a model that prevailed until well after the middle of the 20th century, according to which Egyptian society was divided into two segments. One local, being Egyptian-speaking, illiterate, rural, and in Christian times, heretical, would not outright pagan and the other important. And then in the other sphere, there's Greek speaking, which was well-schooled, city-dwelling Orthodox. And not to do justice on the complexity of the social and linguistic situation in the country, even for the earliest period after Alexander.

As far as written language is concerned, for instance, Egyptian was much more elitist and exclusive than Greek, which could be written by the "man in the street", one might say. So, I'm actually going to read the introduction for this chapter because I think Tovar puts it really well and I don't think I could put it better. So, they say... From the arrival of Alexander in 332 BCE to the Arab conquest in 641 CE, Egypt was a melting pot of languages, scripts, cultures, ethnic groups, and beliefs. The native population was invaded by a dominant group that brought among its instruments of power A new language that would become the language of administration, power, and culture. This created a complex sociolinguistic situation in which not only languages but also scripts had a role to play. Like, wow. That is saying so much about the linguistic identity of ancient Egypt because they're right. It was a melting pot. It was a sense. It was, it was kind of a crucible of languages. You had so many people Visiting Egypt, coming into Egypt, trading with Egypt. And there were so many different languages that were spoken and Aramaic languages and similar languages. Semitic languages can be found in these

hotspots across Egypt such as Alexandria and their different ports. Now, to summarize this portion of the book, Tovar goes on to explain the different identities of people that would have interacted with the ancient Egyptians and how there was a stark difference between Or maybe this is in the introduction, but regardless, what's not mentioned in any of the other sources is that when Ancient Greek was introduced, specifically Demotic around 700 BCE, There were two distinct cultural groups that existed in Egypt.

You had the ancient Egyptians, and they spoke Egyptian still and they were very stuck in their ways. And for preference or for context, ancient Egyptians were a very conservative society. They didn't really take, they didn't take new changes in really well, let alone newcomers. Which is very interesting considering they allowed women to roll. I'm not going to get into that in this episode. You'll have to wait for the episode about gender roles. But it's true. Um, and in ancient Egypt, there were the Egyptian speakers who were rural Egyptians and Egyptian at that time, around the time of the introduction of Greek prior to 700 BCE because that's when Demotic showed up. The, the speakers of Egyptian were considered to be exclusive, which is really cool. But then there's the whole, the whole Population of Greek speakers that inhabited Egypt. So, in these two cultural spheres, well, there we go, that coexisted with each other, um, yeah, it says in the introduction on page seven the fact that Greek was introduced by conquerors and became the language of Being Egyptian speaking, illiterate, rural, and rural. And then there was the Greek-speaking people which were well schooled, city-dwelling, orthodox, and socially superior.

And then it continues on to say, Egyptian was much more elitist and exclusive than Greek. And it says, recent scholarship has generally given a more integrated view of late antique Egyptian society, insisting on the lack of univocal correspondences between language. Ethnicity, religion, social status, or political allegiance and bringing forth many examples that make the old model lie. So I think it's really interesting that there was a unified society that was juggling these two languages and there was kind of like a power struggle between these two languages because eventually there was a language shift to demotic Greek and In the Egyptian language itself, in certain scripts, they actually adopted some, they adopted the Greek language, but they had to add in some of their own scripts for sounds that existed in Egyptian, but that didn't Exist in Greek. Now, it's also important to note that this script, and specifically chapter, or chapter one, written by Tovar, is about Greco-Roman Egypt and it's more in the latter half of the history of ancient Egypt, which is why I'm not going too much into it. But if you want to give it a read, I will highly recommend it. It's very interesting and Tovar talks about linguistic identity from a sociolinguistic perspective.

And that alone is super interesting. So that's kind of, so there's so many things happening in Egypt, linguistically speaking, and I feel like I've said that before, but that's really all what multilingualism is, and we see this on monuments, we see this in papyri times. Uh, letters, these private letters that I'm going to be talking about later. And we see these just in. Political and economic. What's the word? In these scenarios where so many different languages collide with each other, And it's really interesting, to say the least. Now, I mentioned previously that I was going to be talking about dates, and I feel like I might have, or I should have put this at the beginning of the podcast, but I kind of like... I kind of like the direction I went in this. So now to kind of talk about the evolution of ancient Egyptian language, giving, throwing dates out. So, all of this information comes from James Peter Allen. Who was the one who wrote that book in 2013 that I talked about at the start? So, to start, there was Old Egyptian. This existed near the end of the second dynasty, so we're about 2890 to 2686 BC. The first ever sentence that appears is written in this old Egyptian script. And Old Egyptian lasts for about 204 years. And his first ever sentence is... I forget what it says, uh, but Allen does, does... Point it out. Uh, and it's seen under the pharaoh Perisbin. And from Old Egyptian then becomes, then comes early Old Egyptian and late Old Egyptian. And early Egyptian, early old, sorry, early old Egyptian is around 2600 BC to 250 BC. And they're represented by secular texts from the fourth dynasty and early fifth dynasty. And now late old Egyptian Appears from 2450 so at the end of early Egyptian, early old Egyptian. See how confusing this is? So, Late Old Egyptian is in use from 2450 to 2100 BC. It's distinguished by the appearance of pseudo-verbal constructions.

Um, and Allen breaks down what those constructions are and those can also be seen in the supplementary documents for this episode. Again, it's just a lot easier to read than it is to listen to what it is. And then after late old Egyptian, there's a transition to middle Egyptian. Now this transition was very gradual according to Allen. And from Middle Egyptian, we get classical, late, and traditional Egyptian. Now, if you're wondering what Middle Egyptian, those monumental scripts were written in, I do believe it was. Traditional Middle Egyptian is the one that lasted a while. And now classical middle, classical middle Egyptian was from the middle kingdom. So, from about Dynasty eleven to Dynasty thirteen which was from about 2000 to 1650 BC. And then... Late Middle Egyptian was around the second intermediate period to the New Kingdom, which were dynasties fourteen to dynasty eighteen so around 1650 to 1350 BC. And then there was that language death. And then it goes into traditional Middle Egyptian, which was retained for monumental inscriptions and some religious texts until the end of hieroglyphic writing in the 4th century A.D. Which is exactly what Griffith was saying. And then there's Demotic, which comes about 650 Oh wait, sorry, let me back up. So, then there's Late Egyptian. Late Egyptian was seen around the time of Akhenaten, around 1350 BC, which would be dynasty, starting about dynasty eighteen and late Egyptian

then became the standard written language, so everything that was written except for the monumental inscription was seen in late Egyptian.

Allen dives into the different linguistic characteristics of the different Egyptian scripts. And it's very interesting, but to condense this episode, I'm just giving you the basics. And now in late Egyptian there were two forms of the language. There was literacy and colloquial, and then early and late stages. And that doesn't get confusing at all. So, we're about 1300 to 1100 BC, and from Dynasty twenty to twenty-six which was respectively 1100 to 650 B.C. was the late stage, the early stage was from 1300 to 1100 B.C. That's really all he writes about late Egyptian. I might be missing something in my notes, um, and I'll be sure to go back. But then we see Demotic appear, which was a very distinctive writing form about 650 BC. It developed directly from late Egyptian. And then there were three substages, of course, because nothing can be simple in language evolution. So, then there was early Demotic, which was from dynasty twenty-six to dynasty thirty which were during the Ptolemaic and Roman times. The last three centuries of Demotic being alive until the mid-fifth century. And it existed alongside Coptic. So Coptic and Demotic were two different written forms of the same language, which that language being Greek with some ancient Egyptian additions to it. No, I don't believe Allen goes into the different sub-stages of Demotic. He might, I don't know. Um, that's what he writes about Demotic. Coptic, there's six major dialects that I'm not going to get into. Um, there's so many sub-dialects of Coptic. And then he talks about, so Coptic existed... Then? Coptic interested about the 3rd century AD until about 201 AD. And... Then there were old and late historical phases of a single dialect of Coptic, and it gets very complicated in case you're already not lost. And then he talks about how scribes had their own, their own scripts called Hieratic. And it was a written script based on the Greek alphabet and with the addition of eight characters from prior Egyptian scripts to show consonants not found in Greek. So that concludes the end of the multilingual episode.

I'm trying to keep these on the short side and not go into a whole lot of detail because there's a lot there and this is really just... For me to tell you how linguistically diverse ancient Egypt was, uh, contrary to what you might have believed at the start of this podcast episode, So the whole purpose was really just to explain that ancient Egyptian was not the only language and that these letters were being written in Egyptian as well as Greek and How language divided society and how there was language deaths and the whole evolution of the Egyptian language is one that I, there's a whole book dedicated to, um, and it's Really, really cool. It really is. And maybe that's just me saying that because I am a linguistics nerd, but it just is, you know, and when there was a whole language shift towards Greek, that's sociolinguistics, that's a whole other subfield of linguistics that a person can study and You know, Tovar touches on that and the different people that were there and the cultural identity that's tied with language. And that can be its whole own separate miniseries on this podcast. Maybe I'll bring some of my linguistic friends on and

we can really dive into the language aspects of ancient Egypt. But that's the end of this episode. I hope you learned something new because I sure did research this. And the next episode is all about literacy and scribe. So, I'm continuing with the language and then we're going to get into one of my favorite topics being gender roles. And after that, then I'm going to discuss some of the letters that have survived and give voice to them and really tear them apart and give my own conclusions about what those letters really mean. So, until next time, this is the Nile Chronicles.