Fundamentals of Egyptian Grammar, I: Elements

Leo Depuydt

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This is an introduction to Middle Egyptian, spoken in ancient Egypt around 2000 b.c., also called Classical Egyptian. Scribes imitated it long after Egyptian had evolved. Egyptian was both written and spoken from ca. 30002500 b.c. to ca. a.d. 10001500, for nearly 4000 years. The language changed much in this time. Several stages are distinguished. Middle Egyptian, the second, is traditionally studied first.

This book is self-sufficient and suitable for self-teaching. It contains all the necessary vocabulary, a full answer key to all exercises, a list of all hieroglyphic signs that occur, and definitions of all grammatical terms. There are also indexes of passages cited and grammatical topics. The story of the decipherment is told in an appendix.

Middle Egyptian is written with the hieroglyphic script. For all its beauty, this script does not represent the language in full. Thus, vowels are not denoted. Studying Middle Egyptian is an unusual endeavor. Much emphasis is therefore placed on analysis. In fact, this book is in many ways an analysis of the fundamentals of Middle Egyptian cast in a textbook mold for clarity and distinction. The analysis progresses from basic elements to ever increasing complexity by simple incremental steps. No knowledge of grammar or any theory of language is presupposed. Grammatical terms are used parsimoniously.

Only the elementary building blocks of the verbal system are provided. The systematic presentation of the verbal system will require an approach entirely different from a classical textbook. The whole matter is controversial and in flux at this time. In that regard, Middle Egyptian is like no other language. Meanwhile, teaching the elements of Middle Egyptian using this textbook leaves one free to imagine the verbal system according to any theory that might strike ones fancy. The author has tried various approaches to the verb in class.

(Update of 2013) Engagement with the original edition of 1999 by the author and others have produced only little need for change. This reissue is therefore characterized as a "reprint with minor corrections and additions." A detailed list of all the changes is provided for the benefit of owners and users of the original edition. Reflections on a review of the original edition and on what lies beyond the "elements" of Middle Egyptian grammar are also offered.

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