



Learn what those quizzical hieroglyphics mean in Stacy Davidson's JCCC class.

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# READ LIKE AN EGYPTIAN

# DECIPHERING HISTORY

Egyptologist Stacy Davidson has made it her vocation to keep ancient languages, including hieroglyphs, from dying.



A relief from an ancient tomb in the Egyptian galleries at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art shows several examples of hieroglyphics.

By DARRYL LEVINGS  
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The Kansas City Star

Photos by DAVID  
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**I**f a picture is worth a thousand words, what is a word made of pictures worth?

Say, upraised arms over a zigzag line representing water, two bolts of cloth, a crossroad, another bolt of cloth, bread loaf, leg with a foot, vulture and five-pointed star.

More or less, that translates to “Kansas City Star” (articles like “the” were nonexistent) in ancient Egypt’s language, those once mysterious hieroglyphs pocking those many sand-blasted tombs and temples.

Stacy Davidson might be the only person around Kansas City who can read them.

For about three years, she’s taught hieroglyph and Egyptian art courses for Johnson County Community College’s continuing education program.

To her, the first 25 symbols are like those

Stacy Davidson is perhaps the only person in Kansas City who is fluent in hieroglyphics. She can read reliefs from ancient tombs in the Egyptian galleries at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.



# "I'm always interested in learning more languages, the more ancient the better."

STACY DAVIDSON

lettered building blocks children play with.

The vulture and the arm both mean "a," as in the "ah" sound; reed leaf is "ee"; quail chick at the beginning of the word is "w" but in the middle or end is "oo" as in "too"; the foot is a "b" and the owl is an "m." That square is really a stool (or flax bundle) and means "p" while the rectangle is a pool representing "sh."

Only an amateur would confuse the "j" (cobra) with the "f" (horned viper) or the "d" (the hand) with "a" (the arm, which has a hand).

And Davidson is no amateur; she's proficient in hundreds of hieroglyphs, many standing for two or three letters.

"Eventually we work up to full words," she says. "It's like putting a puzzle together, literally like being a detective where all the evidence you have left is something that someone wrote, and they wrote in a language that is not your first language."

It's not easy to write like an Egyptian. That charming leaping bunny figure you see at the Nelson-Atkins Museum?

"It's a hare, it stands for two letters, 'w and n'; we would pronounce it as "when," and it's usually in words meaning 'to exist' or 'to be.'

That star at the end of the word "Star?" Why not just use that instead of vultures and detached legs?

Ah, no, crocodile breath. That is a determinative, a big clue to the word's meaning and indicating the word is complete.

Like Latin, Egyptian is a dead language, gradually replaced by Arabic, although traces of it exist in the Coptic (Christian) Church.

As might be expected, its 17,000-word language changed over the millennia, and, when using papyrus and reed pens, the scribes adopted a more cursive hieroglyphic style.

Then came a different language phase: hieratic. "If you just look at the comparison of the Egyptian 'alphabet' signs to hieratic, you can see that they are not really very close; you also have to decipher each scribe's handwriting."

Then it evolved again into demotic script, harder still.

Egyptian can be read in just about any direction except up. The human or animal faces are clues. "If they face left, read left to right. If they face right, read right to left," she says.

## An Indiana Jones fan

What are the odds that a little girl growing up north of Cairo, Ill., in an area called "Little Egypt," would grow up to become an Egyptologist?

"It may or may not have impacted my interest. Indiana Jones, perhaps, played a small part," Davidson says. "Not so much for the adventure and

action aspect, but in those quieter scenes when he's actually reading ancient texts out loud. I wanted to be able to do that, as well."

She took Latin and French in high school. At Illinois State University in Normal, Egyptian hieroglyphics, ancient Greek and German were absorbed. And she's got some basic Hebrew and Russian.

Her master's degree was in Near Eastern studies, with a specialty in Egyptology, at University of Michigan.

"I'm always interested in learning more languages, the more ancient the better. There are so few people who read some of those ancient languages today I feel it is part of my mission to continue that knowledge so it doesn't die."

An admirable mission, but one not always easy to carry out for what she calls a "trailing spouse." Following her chemist husband's professional posts, she finds herself approaching colleges to see what they might add to the curriculum. Before here, she taught in Michigan and Washington state.

"You don't really see job postings for Egyptologist. So you have to be creative and think outside the box and make a way for yourself," she says, gesturing with hands decorated with fading henna patterns.

"Sometimes they say yes, and sometimes they say no. So you have to get used to rejection, obviously."

Her eight-session "whirlwind" course at JCCC includes royal and divine imagery, temples and tombs, funerary objects, daily life, statuary, animals in hieroglyphs and the always recognizable, often stiff, but fascinating art.

"The ancient Egyptians had no word for 'art,' so it is not fair to judge it by our modern artistic preferences," Davidson says. "Pieces were not signed, and the artisans were anonymous. Each object, painting, relief, and statue was designed with a functional purpose."

She also offers two levels of hieroglyph study and gives the occasional talk at museums. This month she was invited to discuss the Rosetta Stone and hieroglyphs at the Discovery of King Tut Exhibit, which will run until Sept. 14 at Union Station.

Most interested people can't afford the time or tuition to learn these things, seen as a reserve for ivory tower scholars.

"There are only about a dozen places where you can even get a degree in Egyptology, and most of those are Ivy League schools," Davidson says, adding that those interested should not count on the Internet. Most websites have far more wrong information than correct, she says.

Which is why she's happy doing what she's doing.

"Some say they've waited their



An outer coffin in the Egyptian galleries at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art is decorated with a row of “judges,” which are demons the dead must get past to proceed to the afterlife.

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entire lives to learn about ancient Egypt from someone who knows what she’s talking about. Last semester, I actually had a grandmother and granddaughter come, and they drove an hour and half each way to attend my class, which I thought was just amazing.

“I don’t do this because of money;

I do it because I feel it is my vocation.”

### Napoleon’s venture

The modern world’s fascination with all things old Egyptian began with Napoleon’s ill-fated military venture there and was reignited by later archeological digs. But even in

ancient times, the Greeks and Romans found much of interest in the seemingly ageless pyramids and the kings who built them as tombs.

“Cleopatra was closer in time to us than she was to the building of the pyramids at Giza,” says Davidson, noting that some places along the Nile have been inhabited for

4,000 years.

While temple hieroglyphs might boast of the military exploits of pharaohs or recount the annual contributions of oxen and grain to priests, Davidson says Egyptian literature varies widely, including myths, biographies, medical techniques, political criticism, instruction in manners and more.

And she’s translated a good number of them.

“You have adventure stories, which are probably my favorite ones to read, like ‘The Shipwrecked Sailor,’ for example. He gets tossed about in this storm. He’s the only survivor of the entire crew, and he washes up on this island, and he meets this snake that is 30 cubits (45 feet) long and that talks.”

The snake is suspicious and demands the reason for the seaman’s presence, but then opens up about the snake’s own tragic background: his family was destroyed by a star falling on the island. Ultimately he tells the sailor to take heart and gives him many gifts for his king.

Like many stories, it’s found on papyrus; this version in a St. Petersburg, Russia, museum.

**Egyptians put figures called shabtis in tombs, to do work for the deceased in the afterlife. Stacy Davidson teaches classes about Egyptian art and writing at Johnson County Community College.**





**A stele at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art has four main components, Davidson says. It begins with the phrase “an offering the king gives,” a listing of gods’ names and attributes, a request for offerings (which typically include bread, beer, meat, fowl, clothing) and the name and titles of the person who commissioned the stele. In this case, it belongs to Seankhy and his wife “whom he loves,” Ankhu.**

“The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant” is about trickery and the difficulty of winning quick justice. “King Cheops and the Magicians” is a set of tales of miracles, supposedly told by the sons of the ruler who ordered the Great Pyramid built.

“We have one called ‘A Man Who Is Weary With Life.’ Basically, he’s talking to a part of his soul, deciding whether it’s worth it to keep living or not. This is a heavy, philosophical issue.”

Similarly, the ancients wrote down much instruction or wisdom literature, “where you have an older person talking to a younger person, sometimes the king, always how to behave in society, how to treat people.”

“You get literature in every way we have it to today, except, you know, obviously, stuff like email, but they did have ostraca, basically pieces of broken pottery,” she says, “Kind of like an ancient Post-it notes. And they would write things on it. Sometimes it was love poetry, sometimes laundry lists. It was disposable, it didn’t cost anything for them to use.”

She spent the summer of 2004 at Abydos, a Middle Egypt site of many significant temples and tombs. As an artifact analyst and cataloger for the University of Michigan Abydos Middle Cemetery Project, she sorted thousands of baked-clay potsherds.

All disappointingly blank. Not so much as a stylus stroke. Somewhere,

Ra is laughing.

Not even one sly graffito of Cheops as a pompous baboon. Yes, we know the Egyptian writers even complained about the government.

“There are a lot of political things,” Davidson says, including officials cartooned as animals.

“One way they would criticize the government while staying safe-ish ... was to set things in a different time period — ‘Two thousand years ago we had this king, and he did really bad things’ — but they were really talking about the king they had now.”

When she sits down to read a text, Davidson says, it’s similarities, not so much the differences, with the ancient Egyptians that rise from the past.

“They wrestled with mundane struggles as well as existential crises; they wrote love songs, political graffiti and adventure tales. They worried about their children and made preparations for death.

“They are just like us but without our technology — yet even with our computers and machines we still cannot definitively prove exactly how the pyramids at Giza were built.

“They sound modern. I love it when the students discover that.”

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It's not easy carving a career out of Egyptology, but Stacy Davidson has managed to pull it off. She currently teaches for Johnson County Community College. The image above is of a relief from an ancient tomb in the Egyptian galleries at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.