

Article

Reviving Ancient Egypt in the Renaissance Hieroglyph: Humanist Aspirations to Immortality

Rebecca M. Howard 

Department of Art and Design, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN 38152, USA; rmhward2@memphis.edu

Abstract: In his *On the Art of Building*, Renaissance humanist Leon Battista Alberti wrote that the ancient Egyptians believed that alphabetical languages would one day all be lost, but the pictorial method of writing they used could be understood easily by intellectuals everywhere and far into the future. Amidst a renewed appreciation of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics found on obelisks in Italy and the discovery of Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica*, which purported to translate the language, Renaissance humanists like Alberti developed an obsession with this ancient form of non-alphabetical writing. Additionally, a growing awareness of the lost language of their Etruscan ancestors further ignited an anxiety among Italian humanists that their own ideas might one day become unintelligible. As Egyptomania spread through the Italian peninsula, some saw an answer to their fears in the pictorial hieroglyphics of the ancient Egyptians, for they perceived, in Egyptian writing, the potential for a universal language. Thus, many created Renaissance hieroglyphs based on those of the Egyptians. This essay examines the successes and failures of these neo-hieroglyphs, which early modern humanists and artists created hoping that a language divorced from alphabetical text might better convey the memory of their names and contributions to posterity.

Keywords: hieroglyphics; Egyptomania; humanism; pseudo-hieroglyphs; Etruscan; impresa



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1. Introduction

In his *De re aedificatoria* (*On the Art of Building*), fifteenth-century humanist and architect Leon Battista Alberti wrote that the ancient Egyptians

maintained that each nation knew only its own alphabet and that eventually all knowledge of it would be lost—as has happened with our own Etruscan: we have seen sepulchers uncovered in city ruins and cemeteries throughout Etruria inscribed with an alphabet universally acknowledged to be Etruscan; their letters look not unlike Greek, or even Latin, yet no one understands what they mean. The same, the Egyptians claimed, would happen to all other alphabets, whereas the method of writing they used could be understood easily by expert men all over the world, to whom alone noble matters should be communicated. (Alberti [1452] 1991, p. 256)

As Alberti noted, amidst early modern discoveries of monuments depicting the lost Etruscan language, awareness grew about the lost language of these ancestors and ignited anxiety among Italian humanists that their own ideas might one day become unintelligible. This recognition of potentially lost ancestral knowledge coincides with an expanding appreciation of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs found on obelisks in Rome and “translated” in newly discovered texts like Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica* (Horapollo [1505] 1993). For a people already significantly concerned with commemoration and the so-called cult of fame, these new interests inspired a Renaissance humanist obsession with the Etruscan and ancient Egyptian forms of writing.¹ As Egyptomania spread through early modern Italy (and then beyond), some saw an answer to their fears in the hieroglyphic writing of the ancient Egyptians, for they perceived, in Egyptian hieroglyphs, the potential for

developing a universal language that did not rely on varied alphabets, perhaps even a language like that which existed before God separated and dispersed humanity across the world.² Many humanists, thus, created and used new contemporary approaches to pictorial and symbolic kinds of writing and visual communication that were based on and inspired by the hieroglyphics of the ancient Egyptians. These scholars hoped that the resulting devices could help to convey the memory of their names and contributions to posterity, as a pictorial text, like Egyptian hieroglyphics, should have universal appeal, particularly for the intellectual elite. While these Renaissance hieroglyphs (also called neo-hieroglyphs and pseudo-hieroglyphs) did help humanists to be recognized for centuries to come as the great scholars of their time, the relatively short-lived phenomenon unfortunately was never able to fully carry out the commemorative hopes of the intellectuals that made and utilized them as they were simply unintelligible without accompanying alphabetical descriptions.

For the early modern humanist, actual ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs and, more distinctly, a collective misunderstanding of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs became agents that affected period approaches to cultivating commemoration and lasting fame. Renaissance intellectuals saw a kind of magic in the ancient writing and endeavored to devise a pictorial text that drew on the power of that of the ancient Egyptians—a civilization that had endured for thousands of years. Egyptian hieroglyphs were essentially seen as inspired, foundational tools to be used in constructing a new universal and divine language, akin to the Adamic language that Christians believe was once shared across humanity. Filtered through Greco-Roman antiquity, biblical narratives, and Arabic sources that had become available in the medieval period, a superficial concept of hieroglyphic writing served as the inspirational force for forming a purely visual language that could potentially communicate directly to the intellect of the elite, a language that could hold divine mysteries for perpetuity. This hypothetical universal language could thereby convey the great innovations, thoughts, and achievements of Renaissance thinkers to the learned elite of the future, as well.

Although archaeology-based travel expanded in the Renaissance and several scholars did make it to Egypt (including Cyriacus of Ancona, Niccolò Niccoli, Janus Lascaris, and Poggio Bracciolini, among others), these travels seem to have only furthered legends about the ancient civilization and its sacred mysteries (Winand 2022b, p. 98). Beyond the handful of scholars and humanists who crisscrossed the Mediterranean, those few Quattrocento westerners that made their way to Egypt, usually as part of the difficult pilgrimage to Jerusalem, rarely ventured far south. Upper Egypt, therefore, was a *terra incognita*, and very little was really known of the ancient civilization (Winand 2022b, pp. 83–84). A vision of ancient Egypt as a place of mystery and ancestral wisdom was thus collectively rooted in the minds of western Europeans, and it largely still is today (Laboury 2006, p. 44).

2. Complex Origins, Humanist Hubris, and Polysemous Hieroglyphs

It seems inevitable that Italian humanists interested in writings from Greek and Roman antiquity would eventually encounter ancient texts remarking on the wonders of ancient Egypt and its sacred writing thought capable of protecting great secrets. Renaissance scholars saw the ancient authors they were reading as authorities, so this point of view was continually perpetuated (Volkmann 2018, p. 8). Inspired by writers of antiquity, then, humanists saw their neo-hieroglyphic creations as a possible key to ensuring that their memories persisted long after their deaths, especially in the minds of those that truly mattered and were deemed worthy of access to such sacred memories—the learned elite.³

The development of Renaissance hieroglyphs can be traced through numerous cycles, wherein misinterpretations and mistranslations continually enter back into the fold and thereby lead to new creations that are increasingly further diluted and disconnected from the original source (true Egyptian hieroglyphic writing). Drawing from ancient authors both real and imagined, a superficial understanding of Egyptian hieroglyphs first appears in early Quattrocento (fifteenth-century) Italy. However, very few real examples of the pictorial writing were available for Italian humanists to study firsthand. As a result,

attempts to adopt and adapt Egyptian hieroglyphics quickly result in varied distorted mixes of Egyptian, Greco-Roman, and late medieval Christian symbolic forms. In the period, these imaginative Renaissance hieroglyphs were frequently lauded as true ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, even though the neo-hieroglyphs themselves were in a near constant state of evolution. In his canonical text on the topic, *Bilderschriften der Renaissance*, Ludwig Volkmann defined the phenomenon as a new kind of picture writing that is indebted to the hieroglyph, but belonging entirely to the Renaissance. In Robin Raybould's translation of Volkmann, he writes

Since the original meaning of the [ancient Egyptian] hieroglyphs was only understood to some small degree, contemporaries [of the Renaissance] combined, naively and directly, single symbols or sign language, with classical literature, with medieval symbolism and with the Bible, in a form not in any way in the strict Egyptian style but nevertheless in a single idiom, in what was, above all, a peculiarly Renaissance style. (Volkmann 2018, pp. 6–7)

Egyptologist Jean Winand has also written extensively on Renaissance hieroglyphs. Winand sees two distinct types of these fabricated “Egyptian letters”: those that use actual ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics or visual forms, but alter them or group them in ways that do not make any sense; and those that are clearly visually inspired by ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, but are entirely fantastical creations. Examples of this second type also frequently bear visual similarities with ancient Roman pseudo-hieroglyphs and other symbolic forms from early Christianity. However, both types must be accompanied by explanations in alphabetical text to have any chance at being understood (Winand 2023, pp. 55–56).

As Egyptomania continued to infiltrate humanist interests, the idea of the Renaissance hieroglyph was never homogenized, and a single collective source of these new hieroglyphs was never readily accepted. Rules or guidelines for utilizing and/or deciphering any kind of pictorial language accessible to the intellectual elite were also never made. The neo-hieroglyphs that various humanists created and utilized were ultimately indecipherable without accompanying written explanations. So, although they could still function as commemorative devices, their need for alphabetical descriptors rendered them relatively useless in any mission to form a “universal” language that could be disconnected from text-based writing. This lack of homogeneity precipitates the failure of the ambitious concept of the Renaissance hieroglyph, as every neo-hieroglyph of the period was and is only legible when it is described in a known alphabetic text. The humanist dream of perpetual commemoration through a universal, divinely inspired language accessible across time and space to the intellectual elite was simply not possible.

The humanist belief in their abilities to decipher actual ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics and to create a new lasting language from them was led entirely by hubris. As the ancient Egyptian obelisks that could be viewed in the Italian peninsula firmly kept their “secrets”, humanists pretended they did not, essentially persuading themselves that there were no significant barriers to their deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphics.⁴ The cult of fame, pride and eagerness, and a fear of being forgotten caused many great innovators of the Renaissance to wholeheartedly pursue something they were not equipped to understand, yet alone build on. Nevertheless, the pictorial devices that result provide a fascinating case study of the inspirational hopes of Renaissance humanists and the enduring, if enigmatic, power of the visual culture and hieroglyphics of ancient Egypt to act as forces of change on a disparate culture existing over a thousand years after the ancient Egyptian civilization dissolved. Despite the apparent failure in creating an intellectual elite language that could help Renaissance humanists achieve their goals of perpetual fame, these creations nonetheless reflect a fascinating aspect of the revival of ancient Egypt in early modern Italy and inspired a lineage of numerous other types of new symbolic devices. And although these devices do not ultimately work in the universal way that their creators hoped, they still help to perpetuate a sense of curiosity and an intense intellectual rigor—key features of the scholarly world of Renaissance Italy.

3. Remembering the Etruscans and Reviving the Egyptians

Let us return to questions of the Renaissance cult of fame and fears of being forgotten. In other words, why was the apparent magic of Egyptian hieroglyphics so appealing to the intellectuals of Renaissance Italy? The period undoubtedly saw a distinct proliferation of celebrated ideas and innovations resulting from growing interests in the pursuit of knowledge. But what if these irreplaceable ideas simply died with the people of the period? Etruscan, the language of the peoples who thrived in the Italian peninsula long before the Romans, is still not fully understood. In the Renaissance, a fascination with this ancient, incomprehensible language found on monuments and tombs throughout the peninsula stoked a fear of suffering the same fate as these ancestral peoples.⁵ Early modern humanists were concerned that the memories of their own accomplishments might similarly be lost to time through a gradual loss of their written language. As a result, some began to question how to ensure that their ideas lasted well beyond death, especially if an understanding of the languages of Renaissance Italians (namely, the vernacular Italian and the already dying Latin) had a chance of being lost to future generations. In reviving the concept of pictorial writing exemplified by ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, some hoped they might get ahead of the possibility of suffering a fate similar to the Etruscans and their lost language.

While interests in the Etruscan language pervaded in Quattrocento and Cinquecento (sixteenth-century) Italy, so too did interests in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics. As noted above, Renaissance humanists saw a promise of longevity in the pictorial language, seeing a possible universality in a language based entirely in pictures and appearing to be grounded in the observable world (Curran 2007a, pp. 51–63). Renaissance hieroglyphs were thus born. Along with a widespread (yet, remarkably incorrect) appropriation of real ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, these neo-hieroglyphs began to appear in many works of art and writing from the period.

Prompting many humanists to believe they could understand Egyptian hieroglyphics was the 1419 discovery of a text from antiquity known as the *Hieroglyphica*. Found by the Florentine Cristoforo Buondelmonti and subsequently brought to Florence, the fifth-century Greek writer Horapollon's manuscript was essentially a "hieroglyphic dictionary" that purported to explain how to decipher much of the pictorial language.⁶ By 1423, four years after its discovery, Horapollon's manuscript was in the care of a key bibliophile of the period, Niccolò Niccoli, who was well connected to the Medici family. Niccoli made the first of many copies of the *Hieroglyphica* (Volkman 2018, p. 19). Indeed, Horapollon's manuscript was quickly recopied in many iterations and dispersed among the thousands of intellectuals in Quattrocento Florence (Laboury 2006, p. 47). Also known as Horus Apollo or said to be Nilous to the Egyptians, the author Horapollon has not yet been connected to any historically known person (Volkman 2018, p. 16). Over time, scholars have deemed Horapollon likely to have lived in the fifth century, making the author part of late antiquity and early Christianity.⁷ The only complete writing on Egyptian hieroglyphs to have survived from classical antiquity, Horapollon's book of just under two hundred hieroglyphs was published in its original Greek by the Venetian Aldus Manutius in 1505 and was available in Latin about ten years later.⁸ It is believed that Horapollon had some basic knowledge of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, but his explanations seem to be his own inventions. Over the following decades, the text was translated and edited by numerous individuals, who each added their own interpretations and new hieroglyphic creations. Remarkably, the Aldine Press version and other Quattrocento and Cinquecento copies, published iterations, and translations of Horapollon's *Hieroglyphica* were not illustrated (Volkman 2018, p. 18). And later, sixteenth-century versions were almost all illustrated differently, as artists and/or owners individually represented how they each understood the textual descriptions (Winand 2022b, p. 105).

Another notable text that contributed to Renaissance Egyptomania was discovered around 1460 by the monk Leonardo da Pistoia and gifted to Cosimo il Vecchio de' Medici, who immediately had it translated by the philosopher, priest, and head of the new Platonic Academy in Renaissance Florence (founded by Cosimo and based on Plato's Academy),

Marsilio Ficino. Attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, an author who seems to have never existed, this text contains seventeen dialogues in Greek on the topic of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics and the divine knowledge the language guarded, a compilation that came to be known as the *Hermetica* or *Corpus Hermeticum*. The legendary Hermes Trismegistus was believed to be a contemporary of Moses (Laboury 2006, p. 47). Ficino's translation was completed in 1471 and thereafter made available to Florentine scholars and beyond, only working to further spread Egyptomania (Winand 2022b, p. 94).

An additional key influence appeared on the scene just two decades after the Aldine Press released their publication of the *Hieroglyphica*. After the 1527 Sack of Rome, the humanist and cardinal Pietro Bembo came into possession of an unusual object covered in images that came to be known as the *Bembine Tablet* (also *Mensa Isiaca*, *Isiac Tablet*, or *Tabula Bembina*) (Figure 1).

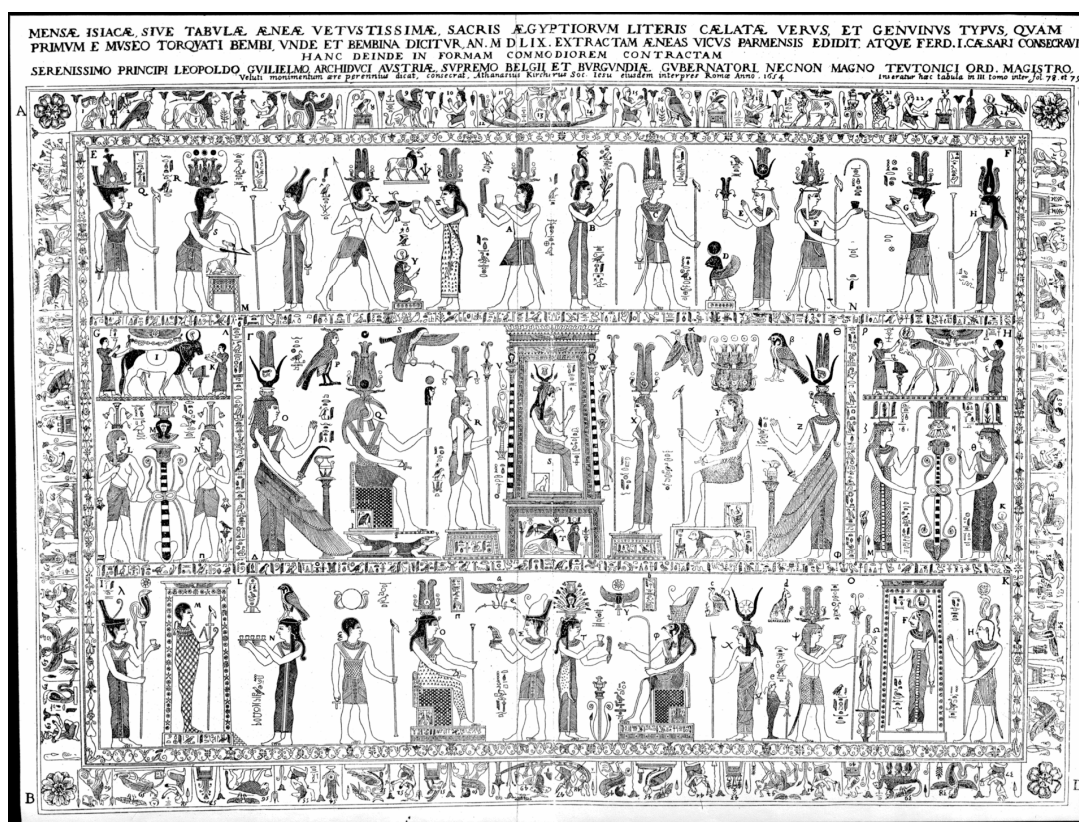


Figure 1. Athanasius Kircher, engraving of the *Bembine Table of Isis*, from *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (Rome, Italy: Vitale Mascardi, 1652–54). Source: Wikipedia, Public Domain.

The *Bembine Tablet* was discovered in Rome sometime in the early 1520s and miraculously saved during Charles V's plunder of the city. The bronze tablet is covered in enameled images that appear very Egyptian-inspired, but scholars believe that it probably dates to around the first century CE and is thus likely of Roman origin. In the Renaissance, though, the *Bembine Tablet* was a true Egyptian artifact and became yet another source or neo-hieroglyphic inspiration. It was also used by period intellectuals to help “decipher” (of course, incorrectly) ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics (Winand 2022b, p. 70). Numerous Cinquecento copies of the *Bembine Tablet* were made, typically accompanied by written explanations. However, the original (probably Roman) creators of the tablet did not even understand what they were depicting, combining actual Egyptian hieroglyphic forms with Roman pseudo-hieroglyphs, so later copies of the object became increasingly divorced from ancient Egyptian writing (Winand 2022b, p. 94). Consequently, numerous versions of Egyptian-inspired, but not true Egyptian, hieroglyphics were created and Egyptomania

continued to quickly spread through humanist circles (Dempsey 1988, p. 344; Curran 2007b, p. 58). These incorrect translations of Egyptian hieroglyphs and fantastical neo-hieroglyphs persisted. Evidence of the perpetuation of misunderstood hieroglyphs can be found in later claims that scholars could decipher the original pictorial language. Seventeenth-century German polymath Athanasius Kircher is perhaps the best known of these, but was long criticized by later scholars for his incoherent and entirely fabricated translations that were presented to and accepted by many of his contemporaries as fact (Winand 2022a, p. 218).

Beyond Horapollo and the probably legendary Hermes Trismegistus, varied other premodern authors who were known to and/or being rediscovered by Renaissance humanists also wrote of the sacred and secretive qualities of Egyptian hieroglyphs. Better known in the genre of Greco-Roman writings on ancient Egypt are those of Plato and Ammianus Marcellinus, but other authors similarly discussed Egyptian hieroglyphics as a form of sacred and elite communication, such as Aristotle, Pythagoras, Strabo, Herodotus, Diodorus, Plutarch, Plotinus, Tacitus, Lucan, Apuleius, Pliny, Lucian, Clement of Alexandria, Iamblichus, and Macrobius, to name a few (Volkman 2018, pp. 13–14; Laboury 2006, pp. 44–45; and Winand 2022b, p. 98). Like Horapollo, works by fifth century theorist Ammianus Marcellinus also purported to explain many ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics. Some scholars speculate that Horapollo and Marcellinus shared a common inspirational source, as neither could provide entirely correct translations of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics (Winand 2023, p. 48).

All these classical writers spoke of the pictorial writing very superficially, though, which activated these persistent legends that hieroglyphs could contain the highest sacred secrets and ancient wisdom. Reading through these ancient texts, Renaissance intellectuals could not help but be inundated with the idea that Egypt had been the birthplace of all wisdom (Laboury 2006, p. 45). The difficulty of deciphering hieroglyphics was really the only proof needed in support of the writing's secrecy, as authors of antiquity claimed that it would have been dangerous and foolish to leave access to such wisdom unguarded and available to the public (Winand 2022c, pp. 38–40). In studying classical texts, then, early modern scholars saw that the Greek and Roman authors they so admired believed Egyptian hieroglyphs could be tools to assist the learned elite in protecting divine mysteries (Curran 1998, p. 163). The Greeks had seen the Egyptian written language as holding "profound insight into the very essence and substance of things". (Iversen 1961, p. 46). These convictions were readily revived in the Renaissance, with humanists believing they were the chosen and privileged few that were meant to receive the millennia-old divine wisdom guarded by an elite form of writing. Marcellinus similarly spoke of the pictorial text as conveying whole ideas in single symbolic forms and as capable of expressing anything imaginable (Marcellinus [4] 1950, 17.4.10–11; as discussed in, Foster 2021, pp. 884–87). For the Renaissance humanist, "anything imaginable" must have implied the most divinely inspired secrets—those of God, of course.

It is important here to contextualize the Renaissance hieroglyph within the extremely devout Christian society of early modern Italy. This was a culture already very familiar with the use of symbolic devices, especially covert communication. Early Christians had used symbols to communicate and connect during periods of persecution (Figure 2). Such symbols were still visible on many of the ancient objects and structures across the peninsula and continued to be used in new decorative programs of churches, monasteries, and other places of Christian worship. Many of these symbols, in fact, still persist today, such as the fish (*Ichthys*), the cross, the Chi-Rho, the dove, the shepherd, and the anchor, to name a few.

Theologians, since late antiquity, had frequently spoken of the potential power of symbolic writing, especially as a way of communicating and deciphering lofty concepts and divine truths (Winand 2023, p. 48). Renaissance Christians were thus readily familiar with forms of pictorial communication. Some Christian symbols were devised to be understood by anyone, while others were much more complex and intended to be deciphered only by those who were well connected within the Church and had an extensive knowledge of theology and the history of Christianity (Winand 2023, p. 49).

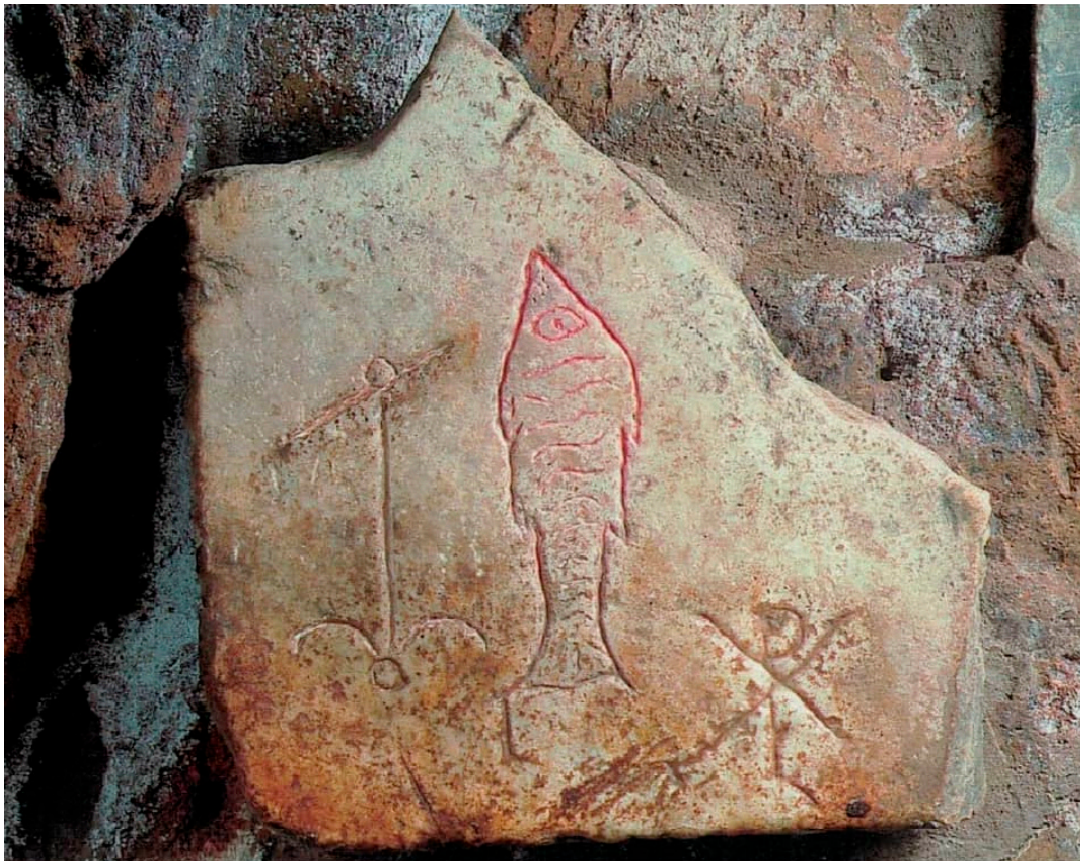


Figure 2. Anchor, Ichthys (Fish), and Chi-Rho symbols, late antiquity (ca. 2nd century CE), Catacombe San Sebastiano, Rome, Italy. Courtesy Catacombs of St. Sebastian, catacombe.org.

4. New Endeavors and Divine Truth in the Renaissance Hieroglyph

In creating new Renaissance hieroglyphs, people of the period wished to emulate the implicit divine essence and apparent magical power of the ancient pictorial language. Volkmann called the early modern study of aspects of ancient Egypt, especially the hieroglyphics, an “intangible fumbling and groping of the field” and claimed that scholarship on the subject is of no use to modern Egyptologists (Volkman 2018, pp. 3–4). Similarly, Winand has noted that humanists’ incorrect interpretations of old and creations of new hieroglyphs that completely misappropriated those of antiquity actually held the field of Egyptology back, claiming that the popularity of Renaissance neo-hieroglyphs and the symbolic devices spawned from the period’s Egyptomania delayed an accurate translation of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics for several centuries (Winand 2021; see also, Winand 2022a, p. 217). However, the growing Renaissance obsession with the ancient civilization and the borrowing of aspects of its art, architecture, and writing are at least testaments to the enduring and powerful nature of ancient Egyptian visual culture—the very thing upon which humanists hoped to draw. Believing that an understanding of Egyptian hieroglyphs had been reserved for the highest members of society, humanists saw themselves as these select individuals, just like the Egyptian priests and elite scribes responsible for memorializing the great thoughts and accomplishments of their own time.⁹ However, genuine attempts at understanding ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs were rather quickly set aside, making room for the Neoplatonic ideal of creating a new system of signs that was capable on its own of conveying the highest divine ideas of the Christian world and Renaissance society without any link to alphabetical writing (Winand 2023, p. 47). Communicating through a purely visual form that was not tied down by language was seen as a way to connect directly with such sacred thoughts, while alphabetical writing might distort them (Winand 2022b, pp. 100–2). The inherent divinity of a picture-based writing appealed to

the many creatives and innovative thinkers of the Italian Renaissance who spoke of their personal talents as literal gifts from God.¹⁰ So, the perceived quasi-divine nature of Egyptian hieroglyphics was ideal for commemorating the contributions of these individuals. And this ideal, universal pictorial writing could purportedly speak directly to the intellect, thus making it superior to any other form of communication (Winand 2022b, p. 103).

Leon Battista Alberti believed that the Egyptians anticipated the demise of their own language, creating hieroglyphics in response—again, a language only accessible to the chosen learned elite (Curran 1998, p. 160). In fact, likely due to the recent discovery of Horapollo's manuscript, Alberti claimed that Egyptian hieroglyphs had actually remained comprehensible over the centuries, while other alphabetical scripts had been lost (of course, this was not true) (Volkmann 2018, p. 21). And importantly, Alberti's understanding of Egyptian hieroglyphs in comparison to alphabetic writing helped to establish an already nascent sense of hierarchy between images and words, which would come to be known as the *paragone* (a "competition" between the arts).¹¹ One of the most significant Renaissance proponents of the power of images over words was Leonardo da Vinci, who wrote in his notebooks that images (especially the art of painting) have the power to immediately convey their meaning to viewers all at once, while words take time to unfold their meaning to listeners or readers. For Leonardo, too, images could be universally understood, surpassing any language barriers in communication (da Vinci [1487] 1989, pp. 20–38). It appears that Leonardo was impacted by the vogue for hieroglyphs and symbolic forms, as he was a creator of several *rebuses*, or pictorial puzzles composed of a series of images, sometimes combined with individual letters (Figure 3).

As we have seen, the philosopher and member of the Medici court Marsilio Ficino also contributed significantly to early modern scholarship on Egyptian hieroglyphics and theories about the divine nature of the language. In fact, Ficino's impact was quite profound, as he had studied and translated multiple texts written by classical and medieval authors, many of which touched on the subject of the Egyptian sacred script. Like Alberti, Ficino also saw the pictorial text as capable of concealing mystic truths in symbols. Ficino believed that the symbolic forms of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics were inspired by nature, which was the source of profound wisdom and divine ideas (Volkmann 2018, p. 21; see also, Ficino [1489] 1989). For Ficino, hieroglyphs carried the very essence of the divine itself (see Robichaud 2017, pp. 45–85). According to art historian Brian Curran, thanks to the input of scholars like Alberti and Ficino, some late Quattrocento Italians even believed ancient Egyptian wisdom had predicted the advent of Christianity and that the Egyptians once possessed a "secret doctrine that anticipated the coming of Christ". (Curran 1998–1999, p. 166; and Laboury 2006, p. 48). Indeed, Renaissance Christian tradition saw ancient Egypt broadly as a place of wise sages who preferred to veil their knowledge in symbolic forms to avoid it falling into the hands of inferior, uneducated commoners (Winand 2022b, p. 100).

New studies of Egyptian hieroglyphics began to appear alongside the creation of new contemporary hieroglyphs, intensifying the spread of Egyptomania. For example, the Venetian Pierio Valeriano's *Hieroglyphica* (*Hieroglyphica, sive de sacris Aegyptiorum litteris commentarii*, or *Hieroglyphics, commentaries on the sacred letters of the Egyptians*), a treatise of fifty-eight volumes on the ancient pictorial form of writing and his period's new inventions, was started after the Aldine publication of Horapollo's text in 1505 and was published in 1556 (Valeriano 1556; Curran 1998–1999, p. 140; Galis 1980, p. 367). Valeriano similarly saw the language as intended for protecting sacred wisdom, to be revealed to the learned few and concealed from the ignorant masses (Galis 1980, p. 364). According to historian Erik Iversen, Valeriano's project tried to "compress the entire knowledge of his period into hieroglyphs", incorporating numerous fabricated devices based on a mixture of Roman, Greek, and Egyptian symbols.¹² And Volkmann notes that Valeriano's collection of neo-hieroglyphs (made by others and of his own invention) and their interpretations was unprecedented in its completeness (Volkmann 2018, p. 74; Valeriano 1556). In other words, Valeriano purportedly made a significant attempt to codify the concept of the Renaissance hieroglyph, and had his endeavor been accepted as the primary source for humanists to

follow, perhaps the fantastical ideal of a pictorial language for the learned elite that did not rely on alphabetical texts could have been eventually achieved. The primary flaw of the Renaissance hieroglyph, though, was its incoherence. A lack of compromise and humanist pride meant that intellectuals of the period continued to create new hieroglyphs and never collaborated to formulate a homogeneous approach to the endeavor. Perhaps more importantly, though, Valeriano's noble attempt to create and compile a single source for neo-hieroglyphs still relied on alphabetical descriptions of his creations.

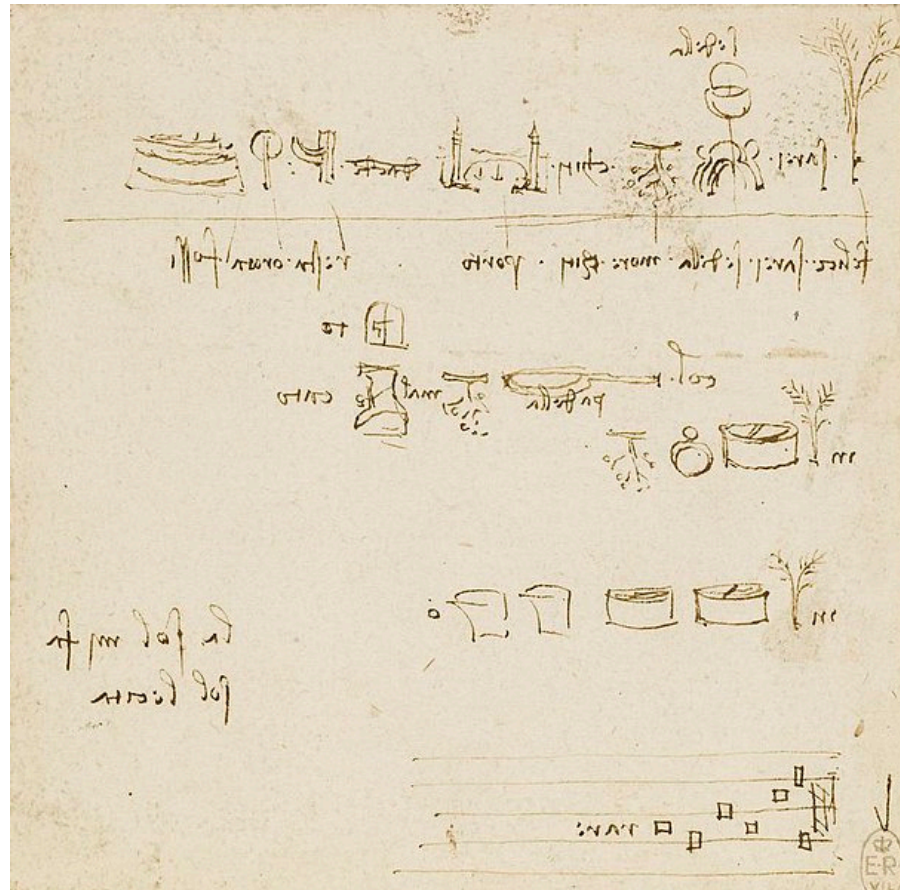


Figure 3. Leonardo da Vinci, *Rebuses* (a sheet of picture-writing or pictographs), ca. 1487–90, pen and ink on paper, Royal Library at Windsor Castle, UK. Source: Wikipedia, Public Domain.

True Egyptian hieroglyphs are found in many artworks from Quattrocento and Cinquecento Italy, often to convey a sense of “otherness” and/or to imply a divine truth inherent to the scene depicted. As the erroneous period belief that humanists could understand the language of the ancient Egyptians persisted and spread, so too did the creation of neo-hieroglyphs. As we have seen, the creation of new Renaissance hieroglyphs was encouraged by humanists like Alberti to commemorate the knowledge and accomplishments of the time (Alberti [1452] 1991, p. 257). According to art historian Karl Giehlow, by the mid-Quattrocento, hieroglyphic-inspired forms had quickly caught on. They were being used in objects like medallions, columns, monumental gateways, commemorative tombs, portraiture, and much more (Giehlow 2015, p. 69, originally published as *Hieroglyphenkunde*, 1915). Exemplary of these new pseudo-hieroglyphs is a personal device consisting of a winged eye and usually a laurel wreath, designed by Alberti himself. It is meant to help preserve his name and fame in an apparently universal and timeless pictorial language.

Despite the grand ambitions of those designing such new hieroglyphic-inspired devices, these symbols never achieve their lofty ambitions. As we have seen, texts that purport

to decipher both ancient and Renaissance hieroglyphics lack homogeneity and uniformity. A single codification is never established for this desired method of communication (not for lack of trying on Valeriano's part). Humanists, who thought themselves to be the chosen, learned inheritors of a divinely inspired pictorial language, hoped that their new symbolic creations could communicate ideas without the use of textual descriptions or codified systems. Yet, even Alberti and his humanist colleagues still had to explain the meaning of their devices in writing. Otherwise, intended meanings of some known devices have simply been lost to time, following the very fate their creators hoped to avoid. Alberti's device is displayed in prints of two of his manuscripts, on his well-recognized *Self-Portrait Medallion* of ca. 1435 (Figure 4) and on the reverse of a portrait medal for Alberti created by Matteo de Pasti, where it is also accompanied by the motto, "QVID TVM", meaning "What then/What next" (Figure 5).



Figure 4. Leon Battista Alberti, *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1435, bronze, 20.1 × 13.55 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington.



Figure 5. Matteo de Pasti, *Portrait Medal of Leon Battista Alberti*, 1446–1450, bronze, 9.25 cm diameter, British Museum, London, England. Courtesy British Museum, London, © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Alberti explains his hieroglyph-inspired symbol in his collection of dialogues entitled *Intercenales* (*Dinner Pieces*). In the dialogue *Anuli* (*Rings*), which appears near the end of the *Intercenales* compilation, the device is discussed in a conversation and is described as follows: “On the first ring is engraved a crown, the center of which is occupied by an eye adorned with an eagle’s wing. . .” (Alberti [1429] 1987, p. 213). The explanation continues, detailing the meaning of the pseudo-hieroglyph’s parts:

The crown is an emblem of gladness and glory. There is nothing more powerful, swift, or worthy than the eye. In short, it is the foremost of the body’s members, a sort of king or god. Didn’t the ancients regard God as similar to the eye, since he surveys all things and reckons them singly? (Alberti [1429] 1987, pp. 213–14)

Alberti’s device symbolizes the quick and absolute power of the eye, the most divine gift to humanity from God, and certainly a feature that highlights man as the greatest of God’s creations. Curran describes Alberti’s eye as being “endowed with an almost divine power over the natural world”. (Curran 1998, p. 161). In most iterations, the hieroglyph consists of a triumphal wreath (a common representation of glory or victory) around the winged-eye (as seen in the de Pasti medal) and incorporates the “QVID TVM” motto. In utilizing this phrase, Alberti’s device thus seems to question the impact of his life and the afterlife of his contributions. The motto might even be a subtle comment on the ephemeral nature of alphabetical languages: what is next for fields of scholarship if one day an understanding of Italian and/or Latin is lost?

Alberti’s *Anuli* describes other pseudo-hieroglyphs, as well, which he calls his *mysteria* (mysteries), alluding to the conviction that such a pictorial language could protect divine mysteries and make them comprehensible only to the chosen learned few. Alberti’s *mysteria* are described as devices that could appear in a series so that they may imply phrases. For example, one series of neo-hieroglyphs is explained by Alberti as: “an elephant’s ear covered by a net, an open forecourt with a burning lamp and candelabrum, a helmet and mask surrounded by a swarm of flies. . .” (Alberti [1429] 1987; and Curran 2007b, p. 75) Inventions like these appealed to other humanists and the scholarly elite and were eventually used in popular parlor games centered on wordplay (Curran 1998, p. 163). Such creations highlighted the necessity for significant academic skills in even attempting to decipher the new devices. And while these Renaissance hieroglyphs proliferated, other real ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs continued to be appropriated (and mistranslated or

otherwise misused) by early modern Italians, such as the ouroboros, which became a popular device symbolizing the circle of life or time (as seen on the reverse of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici's portrait medallion now located in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence, for example) (Gombrich 1972, p. 161). Humanists like Alberti saw such hieroglyphs—both old and new—as having the potential to act as superior substitutes for alphabet-based languages. These devices were thought to be capable of veiling or encoding important elite ideologies, thereby preserving Renaissance ideas only for those future intellectuals who are worthy of understanding them (Curran 2007b, p. 73; and Finzi 1991, pp. 205–8). Again, though, because of a lack of consistency across the early modern use of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs and the creation and use of new Renaissance hieroglyphs, this endeavor was never entirely successful and gradually fizzled out. Nevertheless, dependent on the assumption that learned people of the future would be able to understand their new hieroglyphic inventions, many humanists seemingly still rested easier thinking that their thoughts and accomplishments might live on indefinitely, beyond the inevitable dissolution of knowledge of alphabetical texts, through their creations of new universal forms of communication.

5. Hieroglyphs and Pseudo-Hieroglyphs in Stone, Paint, and Print

As the former capital of the Roman Empire, which at one point in time reached into northern Africa and thus Egypt, the city of Renaissance Rome had at least five obelisks displayed in very public spaces (especially after Pope Sixtus V re-erected and moved many of these obelisks in the mid-Cinquecento).¹³ While Florence was the “birthplace” of Renaissance Egyptomania, thanks to Buondelmonti's discovery of the *Hieroglyphica*, obelisks like those found around Rome became representative of any pagan “Other” and could soon be found to be incorporated into early modern Italian paintings. Venetian painter Gentile Bellini's 1504–1515 *Saint Mark Preaching in Alexandria* (Figure 6) includes one such obelisk, decorated with inscribed pseudo-hieroglyphs.



Figure 6. Gentile (and Giovanni) Bellini, *Saint Mark Preaching in Alexandria*, 1504–07, oil on canvas, 347 × 770 cm, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan, Italy. Courtesy Pinacoteca di Brera, © Pinacoteca di Brera, Milano.

The neo-hieroglyphs are painted very clearly, implying that they were meant to be understood and presumably play a role in reading the whole painting. Unfortunately, their intended meaning has been lost, again highlighting the inability for such neo-hieroglyphs to truly serve as a universal elite language for intellectuals both of the time and of the hypothetical future. Some scholars, however, have attempted to decipher their meaning. Charles Dempsey explained the seven symbols as, from top to bottom, “a crooklike form and a circle, the soles of two sandals, the Roman letters V.L., an owl, an eel (or less likely,

a snake), an awl, and the old moon cradled within the full circle of the new.”¹⁴ He then translates them as a series of ideas based on period humanist uses of similar symbolic devices: “Serapis, subjects, willing vow, death or ignorance, envy or hatred, life to come, and a declining fortune” (Figure 7).¹⁵

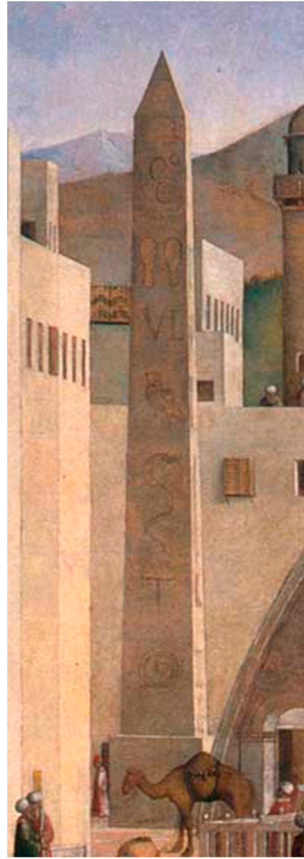


Figure 7. Detail, Gentile (and Giovanni) Bellini, *Saint Mark Preaching in Alexandria*, 1504–07, oil on canvas, 347 × 770 cm, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan, Italy. Courtesy Pinacoteca di Brera, © Pinacoteca di Brera, Milano.

According to Brian Curran and Phyllis Lehmann, the hieroglyphs can be read something like: “Serapis willingly vowed to his subjects that his fortunes would decline in the life to come out of ignorance and envy.” (Curran 2007b, p. 163; and Lehmann 1977, p. 347). Assuming this interpretation is correct and considering the subject of St. Mark preaching to the infidels in Alexandria, the pseudo-hieroglyphs may imply that the “fortunes” (perhaps indicating something like divine favor) of said infidels have already declined because of their disregard for the Christian faith. St. Mark, therefore, is attempting to lead the individuals to whom he preaches toward spiritual fortune through Christ, and Bellini is essentially imploring the viewer to follow along.¹⁶

Just as the symbols decorating Bellini’s obelisk appear to reference a kind of spiritual transcendence, so too do the Renaissance hieroglyphs found throughout much of the poetic and very enigmatic *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (*The Strife of Love in a Dream of Poliphilo*), a text likely written by Venetian author and Dominican friar Francesco Colonna and published in 1499 by the famed Aldine Press (Galis 1980, p. 367). The text is filled with hieroglyph-based intellectual puzzles, which seem intended to inspire a kind of transcendental thinking beyond merely that which is intelligible (read in the text or seen in its accompanying woodcut images). Scholar of early modern iconography Ernst Gombrich likewise described the Renaissance hieroglyph as a device that produces a puzzle within the mind of the observer, inspiring one’s consciousness to rise to a higher level—a state of mind beyond the image (Gombrich 1972, p. 159). Any understanding of the remarkable hieroglyphic

inscriptions in the *Hypnerotomachia*, however, can only be accomplished by reading the translations and explanations written in the text. So, Colonna's Renaissance hieroglyphs similarly fail to function in this desired universal and lasting way that might outlive alphabetical languages. However, the book importantly preserves the innovative spirit of Renaissance humanists, as it is still considered to be one of the most notable publications from the period, primarily because of its abundant fabricated neo-hieroglyphics (Davies 1995, p. 37).

Indeed, the *Hypnerotomachia* is often lauded as the most important period resource for those interested in creating hieroglyphs and emblems, especially as its influence spread far beyond the Italian peninsula (Volkman 2018, pp. 28–29, 46). Originally composed in an inventive form of ornate Latin (which alone would have been difficult to decipher), the story follows protagonist Poliphilo through a dream and quest for his beloved Polia. Colonna's text is accompanied by 172 woodcuts of invented monuments, and most are decorated with pseudo-hieroglyphic inscriptions (whether those inscriptions are actually pictured or merely described). These inscriptions are all translated in the book, and they assist Poliphilo in understanding key truths of the world as he traverses fictional lands in search of Polia. Detailed translations accompany each set of hieroglyphs that Poliphilo encounters (Curran 1998, p. 170). Despite the reader's reliance on these translations, though, Poliphilo is apparently able to immediately understand the meaning of nearly all the neo-hieroglyphs he encounters. Poliphilo thus becomes the conceptual embodiment of the learned elite—the ideal intellectual to whom Renaissance hieroglyphs might communicate sacred wisdom without the assistance of alphabetical text. The *Hypnerotomachia*'s inscriptions are not easily read by all, and the book itself is even written in a poetic, unusual form of Latinate Italian that would have been very difficult to read. Poliphilo's character is a fictional ideal reflective of the time—a translator and keeper of key truths that are only accessible through this simultaneously universal and exclusive pictorial language.

For example, one of the earliest monuments that Poliphilo encounters is a huge elephant carved from “a rock blacker than obsidian” and carrying an obelisk upon its back with a large stone below its belly (acting as a structural support) (Figure 8).

“This square block had Egyptian characters beautifully drawn on three of its faces”, Colonna writes (Colonna 1999, pp. 36–37; See also, Colonna 1499). Poliphilo describes these hieroglyphics as follows:

First, the horned skull of a bull with two agricultural tools tied to the horns; then an altar resting on two goat's feet, with a burning flame and, on its face, an eye and a vulture. Next, a washing basin and a ewer; then a ball of string transfixed by a spindle, and an antique vase with its mouth stopped. There was a sole with an eye, crossed by two branches, one of laurel and the other of palm, neatly tied; an anchor, and a goose; an antique lantern, with a hand holding it; an ancient rudder, bound up together with a fruited olive-branch; then two hooks, a dolphin, and lastly a closed coffer. (Colonna 1999, p. 41)

Although described as “Egyptian”, these symbols are Renaissance hieroglyphs, intended to be part of an ideal language meant only for the learned elite. Poliphilo reads the hieroglyphs as follows: “From your labour to the god of nature sacrifice freely. Gradually you will make your soul subject to God. He will hold the firm guidance of your life, mercifully governing you, and will preserve you unharmed.” (Colonna 1999, p. 41). Just as the pseudo-hieroglyphs on Bellini's painted obelisk reference the need for Christianity among the Alexandrian infidels, Poliphilo's reading of these hieroglyphs reflect a similar religious ideology and can perhaps be understood as referencing the benefits of salvation that one might achieve through a submission of the soul to God, or as the devout Renaissance Christian might say, by creating a space for God in one's heart. Throughout the text, Poliphilo encounters, translates, and describes for the reader numerous other hieroglyphic encounters, and many of his readings seem to have at least a subtle Christian undertone, reflecting the pervading religious atmosphere of the period.

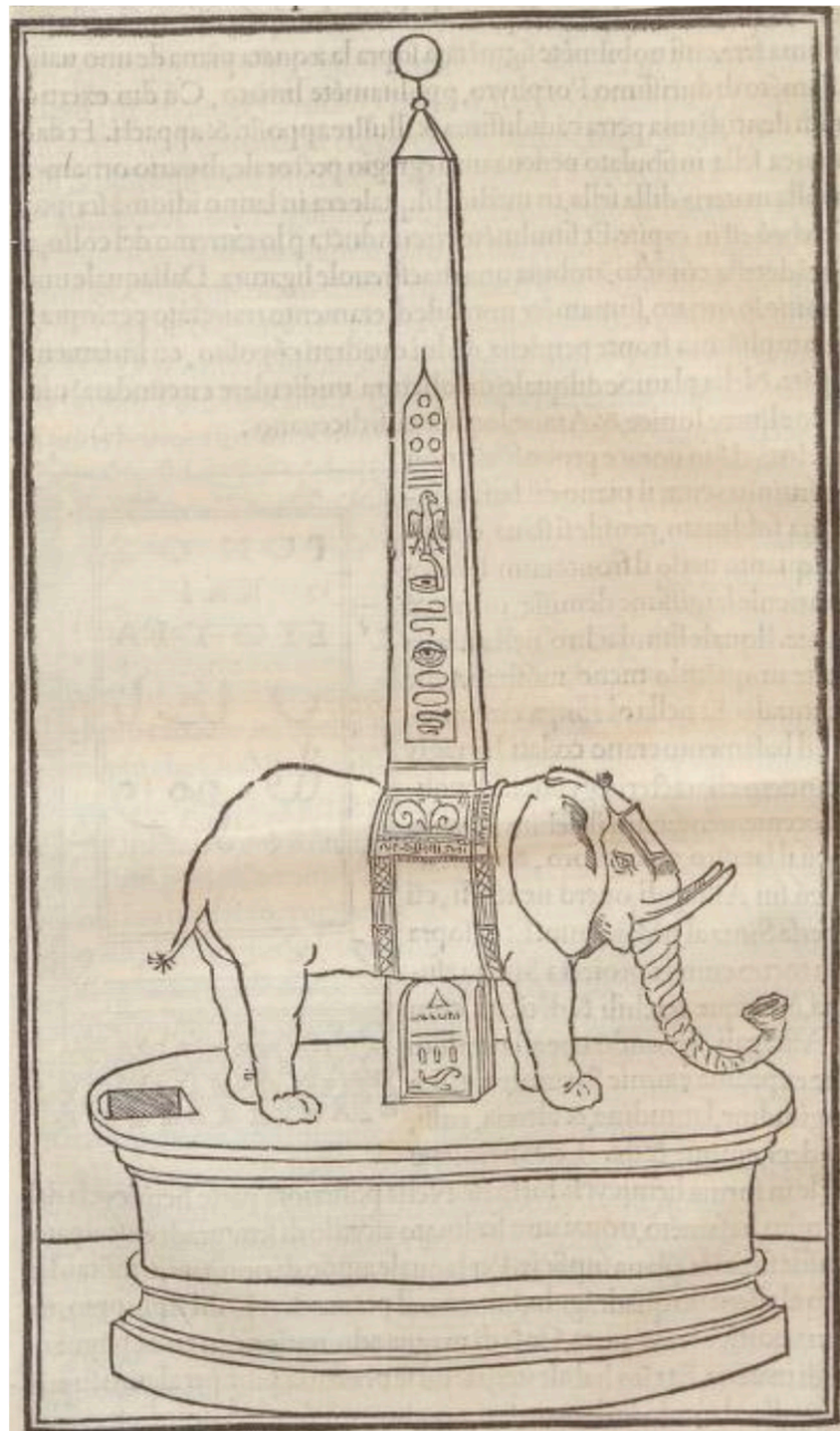


Figure 8. *Elephant and Obelisk woodcut illustration, from Francesco Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (Venetiis: Aldus Manutius, 1499), p. 33. Courtesy Biblioteca de la Universidad de Sevilla and Internet Archive.*

Like other examples of Renaissance hieroglyphs, the *Hypnerotomachia's* enigmatic visual symbols can only be read by Poliphilo, or of course, the author Francesco Colonna, and therefore cannot form the basis of an exclusive language meant for the learned elite. Nevertheless, this celebrated manuscript significantly furthered the creation of new Renaissance hieroglyphs and helped to stoke the fire of Egyptomania. The book's Egyptian-inspired hieroglyphics reasserted Renaissance connections to antiquity, while also attempting to preserve humanist values and knowledge in a pictorial language that might one day be

divorced from its alphabetic descriptions. Remarkably, just as Horapollo's readings of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs and his neo-hieroglyphic creations were accepted as truth by the humanists of Renaissance Italy, so too were the hieroglyph-covered monuments in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* viewed as authentic (or at least probable) examples of ancient monuments covered in a very real and decipherable universal language (Curran 1998, p. 177). It is important to continue to note, however, that the pseudo-hieroglyphs of the Renaissance repeatedly fail to achieve the humanist goal of a language that might outlast alphabetic texts and communicate important ideas to the learned elite of the future, largely because a single homogenous and codified approach to creating this new language was never established or widely accepted. Renaissance hieroglyphs can thus be described as the varied Egyptian-inspired symbolic devices that resulted from humanist experimentation in search of a universal way to ensure their memories, but which never really succeeded in doing so.

6. Conclusions: The Renaissance Hieroglyph and Its Descendants

While some humanists like Pierio Valeriano tried to create a single compendium that could serve as a primary starting point for a universal pictorial language, such an organized approach simply did not catch on. What is more, a thorough understanding of what was truly a product of ancient Egypt or what could be called "Egyptian" was never formed. Winand notes that people of the period seemingly saw any symbol or sign that was even slightly reminiscent of actual Egyptian hieroglyphics as such, calling these symbols "Egyptian letters". (Winand 2023, p. 55). Certainly, this approach contributed to mass confusion about actual hieroglyphs and neo-hieroglyphs, thereby further hindering any possibility that Renaissance humanists might actually decipher real hieroglyphics or collectively and coherently use any new ones. Another interesting viewpoint has been offered by Egyptologist Dimitri Laboury, though. Laboury suggests that perhaps most Renaissance hieroglyphs were never really meant to be directly translated. Perhaps their imprecision and lack of homogeneity was intentional and their use in artworks was simply meant to evoke ancestral wisdom (Laboury 2006, p. 52). This is almost certainly true in some cases, and all Renaissance hieroglyphs succeed in at least celebrating the curious and intellectual nature of the time. However, many of the neo-hieroglyphic creations of the Renaissance were arguably meant to communicate something more specific—especially to the intellectual elite, as they were created in the service of commemoration (of people, events, or the general spirit of the time).

Returning to Leon Battista Alberti, the major proponent of the universal promise of Renaissance hieroglyphs and designer of his own pseudo-hieroglyphic device (his winged-eye symbol), one can see that these neo-hieroglyphs did serve as inspiration for the creation of other types of popular symbolic devices. Interestingly, Alberti's use of a written motto in several iterations of his personal device counters his own insistence that an entirely pictorial universal language based on ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics might be formed to outlast alphabetical languages. With the addition of the "QVID TVM" motto, though, Alberti's device can more accurately be called an *impresa*, a personal symbol consisting of a combined image and short phrase. As Egyptomania consumed much of the Italian peninsula, *imprese* saw a simultaneous increase in interest, as well. While these devices drew significant influence from the ancient Egyptian form of writing, creators of *imprese* were also inspired by medieval heraldry. Nevertheless, the form remains effectively tied to the concept of neo-hieroglyphs in the Renaissance. Numerous other pseudo-hieroglyphs that largely rely on short text-based phrases like Alberti's can be found in Cinquecento manuscripts like Paolo Giovio's *Dialogo dell'imprese militari et amorose* and Scipione Bargagli's *Dell'imprese*, books that are filled with these combinations of hieroglyph-like images paired with brief Latin mottos, thereby further graying the desired separation of alphabetical text and pictorial symbols (for an example of one such *impresa*, see Figure 9) (Bargagli 1594).



Figure 9. Scipione Bargagli, “Per te surgo” *impresa*, from *Dell’imprese* (Venice, Italy: Appresso Francesco de’ Franceschi, 1594), p. 266. Courtesy Rare Book & Manuscript Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and Internet Archive.

What is more, the *impresa* found in such volumes must also be explained by an accompanying description written, of course, in an alphabetical language. The proliferation of such creations and the large volumes dedicated entirely to them might imply that by the mid-Cinquecento, some humanists were no longer convinced that great matters of importance could really be preserved without the use of alphabetical language, even while Valeriano was working to codify the concept and preserve the great knowledge of the Renaissance in hieroglyphic forms.

Consequently, despite the remarkably widespread popularity of creating neo-hieroglyphs, the ideal of the Renaissance hieroglyph never lived up to its supposed potential as a substitute for text-based languages. In fact, the most significant period legacies of the Renaissance hieroglyph are its incorporation into the *impresa* and the *rebus*—a puzzle composed of a series of pictographs and typically accompanied by individual letters or short phrases, which similarly saw a revival in early modern Italy. *Rebuses*, like *imprese*, were used in the popular games of wordplay that were common during elite and courtly gatherings.¹⁷ Although they were the descendants of the universal ideal of the Renaissance hieroglyph, the *impresa* and the early modern iterations of the *rebus* nonetheless continued to rely on alphabetical writing to really communicate their messages and often required further explanation in accompanying written descriptions. Over time and nearing the Seicento (seventeenth century), connections to true ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs found in these descendants of the Renaissance hieroglyph were increasingly diluted (Volkman 2018, p. 116). Although far removed from their original inspiration, however, the lofty concept of the period’s neo-hieroglyphs replicated the ancient Egyptian division between the literate and illiterate (or those who had access to knowledge and those who did not) by helping to preserve the intellectual air of the Renaissance and assisting in the commemoration of some of the period’s intellectuals. And just like those of the ancient Egyptians, Re-

naissance hieroglyphs helped learned people of the time express and perpetuate their power and social distinction. But despite varied attempts at homogenization, the concept never succeeded in achieving the goal of a universal yet exclusive language that could truly commemorate the specific contributions of humanists and scholars and serve as an antidote to the anticipated future loss of alphabetical languages.

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Notes

- ¹ The well-known Vatican obelisk does not have a hieroglyphic inscription, but fragments of several others provided ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs for the Renaissance humanists to admire. See [Curran \(1998\)](#).
- ² While the term “Egyptomania” is typically associated with the European obsession with Ancient Egypt in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (especially in France), a similar phenomenon occurred in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy, and the same term is equally applicable. For the story of a language once shared by all of humanity and the construction of the Tower of Babel, see the *Book of Genesis*, 11.1-9 (King James Bible). “And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there. And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them throughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top *may reach* unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. And the Lord said, Behold, the people *is* one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth”.
- ³ Jean Winand writes that Alberti’s creation of a hierarchy of sorts that sees hieroglyphic writing as superior to any other form of communication causes Alberti to reserve the understanding of hieroglyphs for only educated people who were worthy of being entrusted with such important secrets. See [Winand \(2022b\)](#), p. 103).
- ⁴ [Winand \(2023\)](#), pp. 78–79). Winand writes, “Although hieroglyphic inscriptions that could be seen in Italy were firmly keeping their secrets, they [Renaissance humanists] apparently quickly persuaded themselves that they had at least understood the mechanisms of hieroglyphic writing. This explains why they confidently composed their own inscriptions in the same script”.
- ⁵ The Etruscans flourished in modern-day Tuscany, between Italy’s Arno and Tiber Rivers, from the Iron Age to the end of the Roman Republic (~1000 B.C. to 100 B.C.). They left behind thousands of inscriptions, but no true literature. During the Italian Renaissance, many attempts were made to interpret the language, as discoveries of Etruscan stonework containing mysterious inscriptions abounded. See [Bonfante and Bonfante \(1983\)](#), pp. 7–12).
- ⁶ [Horapollon \(\[1505\] 1993\)](#). See also [Curran \(2007b\)](#), p. 23). Horapollon “Niliacus” or “Nilous” might be the Alexandrian scholar Horapollon the Younger (ca. 450–500). Curran explains of Horapollon’s text, it “gives (sometimes multiple) allegorical explanations. A number of these images and their meanings have been shown to derive from authentic Egyptian tradition. . . . But despite these individual authenticities, Horapollon provides no explanation of how these image signs could be joined to form sentences or compound thoughts. . . . These limitations would have consequences for Horapollon’s Renaissance readers. . . .”.
- ⁷ [Volkman \(2018\)](#), pp. 16–17, trans. Raybould). Volkman notes that the equally unknown translator of Horapollon’s *Hieroglyphica* is known solely as Philippus or “Philip”.
- ⁸ See, [Horapollon \(1505\)](#), [Horapollon \(1595\)](#), Internet Archive; [Horapollon \(1517\)](#); [Horapollon \(\[1505\] 1993\)](#); see also [Iversen \(1961\)](#), pp. 47–49); and [Curran \(2007b\)](#), p. 89). In the late 1480s, Aldus Manutius travelled to Venice, where he founded a publishing business. Manutius made many classical works of literature available to the public. Although the city of Venice was at the forefront of the printing of Latin books, “very little Greek printing had been done at that stage anywhere in Italy, and none at all elsewhere in Europe”. Over the years, the publisher acquired and copied many Greek texts, and his name became increasingly renowned across Europe. See [Davies \(1995\)](#), pp. 6–10).
- ⁹ Hieroglyphs were seen as “allegorical pictographs that had been devised by the Egyptian priests to conceal their religious and scientific doctrines from the ‘vulgar’ masses”. The information was to be saved for the “enlightened or initiated elite”. ([Curran 1998](#), p. 156).
- ¹⁰ Patricia Emison writes of the concept of the “divine” artist in the Renaissance, in association with artistic genius, or *ingegno*, a “complex concept”. *Ingegno* was “sometimes routinely dubbed divine”. This perceived sense of divinity gave artists a particular amount of power, as well as those individuals able to act as patrons for “divine” artists. ([Emison 2004](#), pp. 4–9).

- ¹¹ For a discussion of the hierarchy implied in Alberti's writing, see [Winand \(2023, pp. 52–53\)](#).
- ¹² Valeriano's manuscript was originally intended to be an analysis of Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica* but became "the most important encyclopedia of symbolic imagery in the Renaissance". [Iversen \(1961, p. 20\)](#); See also [Valeriano \(1556\)](#).
- ¹³ For a fascinating study of the re-erection and Catholic exorcism of ancient Egyptian obelisks in Renaissance Rome, see [Cole \(2009\)](#).
- ¹⁴ [Dempsey \(1988, p. 348\)](#). Dempsey sees the images displayed on Bellini's obelisk as belonging to a class of Renaissance hieroglyphs, which he refers to as *epigraphical*, defining such symbols as those that can be discursively read and not merely intuited.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 348–59.
- ¹⁶ Near the bottom of the obelisk, the hieroglyph that is described by Dempsey as an awl appears similar to a tau cross in form. Dempsey explains that it can be read as representing "vita ventura" or "life to come", a reference to the "dawning of a new era" with the salvation gained through Christ's sacrifice. Bellini's "crooklike form and a circle" appears to combine a shepherd's staff with the Egyptian hieroglyph for life, the ankh. For more on the latent Christian symbolism on Bellini's obelisk, see [Dempsey \(1988, pp. 348–49\)](#).
- ¹⁷ [Gombrich \(1972, p. 162\)](#). The practice of creating *rebuses* dates back to at least Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt. As Egyptian hieroglyphics became a new obsession in Renaissance Italy, other forms of symbol-based communication saw growing popularity as well. The *rebus*, however, was never viewed as able to carry the same lofty possibilities as the hieroglyph, and it was instead used almost solely in intellectual games.

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