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Abdulkareem Said Ramadan  
*Gettysburg College*

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# Prehistory to 1250: Languages

**Abstract**

The Hemic group includes the Egyptian and Coptic languages, the Libyan and Barbarian languages, the Koshtia languages, and the languages of the original inhabitants of the eastern part of Africa. [*excerpt*]

**Keywords**

language, middle east, north africa, cultural sociology

**Disciplines**

African Languages and Societies | Near Eastern Languages and Societies | Sociology of Culture

**Comments**

This entry focuses on languages in the Middle East and North Africa, discussing their appearance, dissemination and development from prehistoric times until 1250 AD. It also discusses the circumstances that accompanied the spread of some of these languages—and the extinction of others—as well as the survival of some of them to modern times.

The Southern group includes the southern Arabic and the Ethiopian languages. South Arabic took its alphabet from the Canaanite language, which came to the southern area of the Arabian Peninsula in about 1300 B.C.E. The inscriptions in South Arabic date to the period between the 7th and 5th centuries B.C.E. Several dialects have branched from the South Arabic, the most significant of which were Saba'aite, the Mianite, the Katbanite, and the Hadramite dialects. Ethiopian is close to old Arabic and spread in the south of the Arabian Peninsula around 1000 B.C.E. The oldest known Ethiopian language is Ge'ez, which is also known as Ethiopian.

### The Struggle Over Language

The Hemic group includes the Egyptian and Coptic languages, the Libyan and Barbarian languages, the Koshtia languages, and the languages of the original inhabitants of the eastern part of Africa. There were no strong militaries among the speakers of these languages, so they were dominated over time by outside languages brought to them through military conquest. Thus, the Coptic and the Amazigh languages were eclipsed by Arabic, and the Kosthian languages were also lost in the struggle with the Semitic-speaking people who occupied most of their areas. However, the Semitic languages themselves also witnessed internal struggle. The first struggle was between the Aramaic languages on one side and the Acadian and Canaanite languages on the other. So Aramaic, at first, replaced Acadian at the beginning of the 4th century C.E. and then replaced Hebrew at the end of the same century. On the other hand, the Arabic language spread to the detriment of the old Yemeni languages and then to the previously Aramaic-speaking regions.

As for the Hieroglyphic language, it existed in the Nile valley and its writing system was used in ancient Egypt, initially, to make calculations and to register events, names, and titles. The hieroglyphic writing is considered to be the first writing system in the region. The similarity between the Egyptian and Ugaritian writing systems suggests there was sharing between the two, although it is not clear enough if one adopted the system from the other or if there was continual mutual exchange.

Abdulkareem Said Ramadan  
Gettysburg College

**See Also:** Alphabet Origins; Cuneiform and Origins of Writing; Literature.

### Further Readings

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## Learning

The basic patterns of education in the Middle East were initially set in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. New narratives and values were added through conquests and nomadic incursions, and cosmopolitan culture was formed under multinational empires. Increased literacy brought by the introduction of alphabetic writing systems challenged temple and court monopoly over learning, a challenge that reflected wider religious and social change in the Axial Age. By the Islamic period, learning became a combination of the cosmopolitan intellectual culture of past empires and teachings based on the dominant Axial Age religions.

Although there is no doubt that oral learning existed in the prehistoric Middle East, concrete evidence of institutionalized learning appears only with the introduction of writing in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamian Sumer. The complex nature of the hieroglyphic and cuneiform writing systems ensured that literary education was confined to the elites. Whether in the Sumerian *edubba* (tablet-house) or Egyptian “houses of instruction,” boys began learning from a very young age. Female literary education was rare. The student first learned to write basic sounds and words and eventually mastered copying literary models (often a text on morals). Since education was supervised by the priesthood and court administration, students were also instructed in religious rites and relevant practical subjects such as astronomy and engineering. Records show that physical beating