What we know about ancient Egyptian mathematics comes mainly from two papyri, one written around 1850 B.C. and the other about 200 years later.

Sept/Oct 1998 — Math Club by Mail

The earlier scroll is called the Moscow papyrus, because it now belongs to the Moscow Museum of Fine Arts. It contains 25 problems. The later one is the Rhind papyrus (named for Egyptologist A. Henry Rhind, who found it.) The Rhind papyrus is about 18 feet long by 13 inches high and contains 85 problems, including the "Secret Number" trick on page 5.

Egyptian Math in Hieroglyphs

Be careful when you try to read Egyptian numbers. The Egyptians wrote from right to left, which seems backwards to us.

Place value didn't matter to an Egyptian scribe. Instead of using the symbol for "1" in different places to stand for "100" or "1000," the scribe used a completely different symbol. He could have put his symbols in any order and still been able to read the number. But by tradition, scribes wrote the largest part of the number first (on the right).

Egyptians wrote their calculations both horizontally and vertically, as we do. But, like many students doing homework, they were lazy. They usually wrote as little as possible. They often left out symbols or words that might show what they were doing, so translating a calculation can be tricky.

Remember to read from right to left. The first one is done for you:

The key to hieroglyphic numbers:

| $=1$ $|||$ over $|||$ $= 9$

$||=2$ $\cap = 10$

$|||=3$ $= 100$

$||||=4$ $= 1000$

$=5$

$=6$ = "add to"

$=7$ = "take away"

$=8$ = "total"

(symbols are often left out)

(a) ∥∩ 👑 𝄪 ⌃ 𝄪

This means 5+7=12.

(b) ? 👑 ...

(c) ? 👑 ...

(d) ? 👑 ...