

History prize for teen who translated papyrus

Jack Blackburn

Few visitors to the British Museum can actually read the ancient words on the artefacts — but one teenager has turned an object's script into a book.

Michael Hoffen's work on the Papyrus Sallier has earned the 16-year-old not just a publishing deal but an award.

Michael, who comes from New York, is the recipient of the Emerson prize for outstanding promise in history. His passion for the subject was fired as a young boy by Usborne and Dorling Kindersley books — and he now has his own title, *Be A Scribe*.

"Hieroglyphs are a particularly beautiful language," Michael said. "They aren't just arranged in one row. Some of them are stacked on top of each other and that's to make it more visually appealing.

"When people are constructing languages, you don't think of visual appeal as the number one top of the list, but actually it was very high on the list for ancient Egyptians."

Michael's book is based on a text more than 3,000 years old, which he translated with the assistance of his mentor Dr Christian Casey and co-author Dr Jen Thum.

Using the online resources of the British Museum, Michael was able to interpret the papyrus's hieratic script — a cursive simplified version of hieroglyphs, and the primary form of



The Papyrus Sallier's tale of a father's career advice for his son was turned into a book by Michael Hoffen, 16

writing in ancient Egypt. Having translated it, Michael used its story as the basis for his own book, telling the papyrus's tale of an Egyptian father trying to convince his son to work hard and become a scribe, lest he end up with a much worse job.

"A lot of the books out there were filled with modern-day depictions and modern-day illustrations, and there's nothing necessarily wrong with that," Michael said.

"But I do think there's something special about learning history through genuine artefacts

that you can't get through modern-day illustrations."

Michael might not have written the book at such a tender age had his knowledge of ancient Egyptian languages not been turbocharged by the pandemic, which prevented him from taking a course taught by Casey. Michael would not let lockdown deny him his ancient Egyptian fix, however, and contacted the expert directly to start working on the subject.

Michael already had a love of ancient languages from studying Latin at school, and now has added great swathes of Egyptian to his repertoire. Yet such is the complexity of the

languages involved that he has much to learn. Indeed, he would still struggle with some hieroglyphic scripts at the British Museum — but he isn't done yet.

"It might seem a bit outlandish, but I hoped I can get to the point where I could walk into museum, look at an Egyptian artefact and immediately tell what it says. Christian Casey is certainly at that point, and he's a PhD," Michael said — suggesting there is some way until he reaches the apex of his academic pyramid. "I'm not exactly sure where I want to go. A career as an author would be quite an amazing path for me but I think Egyptologist is certainly a predictable next step," he said.



“Virtual reality let me practise hundreds of