

The Rosetta Stone:
The Key to Understanding Egyptian Hieroglyphs

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In 1799, an object was discovered in Rosetta, Egypt that would spark many European scholars' interests in the mysteries of the ancient Egyptian culture. The discovery of the Rosetta Stone was a turning point in the world's understanding of the ancient Egyptians and their highly advanced civilization. The discovery of the huge stone tablet marked the beginning of the race to uncover the long-forgotten meanings of the Egyptian hieroglyphic and demotic scripts.

The Rosetta Stone is a rather interesting artifact (see appendix item 1). One source describes it as "the most famous piece of rock in the world."¹ The dimensions of the stone are three feet nine inches tall, two feet four and one half inches wide, and eleven inches thick.² The stone is extremely heavy for its size, weighing almost 1,500 pounds. When the stone was first found in 1799, it was thought to be made of black basalt stone. After two hundred years, the stone was finally *correctly* identified, after thorough microscopic observation and chemical analysis, as being formed of dark gray granite.³

It is now known that one side of the stone is inscribed with a decree honoring the thirteen-year-old Ptolemy V Epiphanes on his first year of rule. The proclamation, inscribed on March 27, 196 BC, is written in three different types of writing: Egyptian hieroglyphic at the top, demotic (a late cursive form of the hieroglyphic writing) in the middle, and Greek at the bottom (see appendix item 2). The writings consist of fourteen lines of hieroglyphs, thirty-two lines of demotic, and fifty-four lines of Greek writing. The stone is incomplete; more than half of the hieroglyphic section is missing, which

¹ Parkinson, Richard. Cracking Codes: The Rosetta Stone and Decipherment. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999. 19.

² Sewall, Max. "The Discovery of the Rosetta Stone." 2002. Military History Press: The Napoleon Series. 28 December 2004. <http://www.napoleonseries.org/research/miscellaneous/c_rosetta.html>

³ Parkinson 23.

caused quite a few problems during the deciphering. Another problem was that there are no paragraphs or punctuation in the Egyptian scripts.⁴ There was no way to tell where words and sentences began or ended, unless you knew the script. Many experts agree that the stone was part of a much larger stela (an inscribed and/or decorated tablet⁵) that was almost certainly headed with the winged sun-disk that was popular on stelae (plural of stela) from the Ptolemaic period.⁶ There is a section missing out of the bottom right corner as well.

In the late 1700's, France and Britain were at war. The French, under Napoleon Bonaparte, decided they could defeat the British by attacking Egypt and subsequently controlling the rich food supply from along the Nile⁷, as well as gaining control of profitable trade routes to the East. The French gained control of Alexandria in the summer of 1798. The antiquities of ancient Egypt came under particular scrutiny when the team of historians and scientists that Napoleon had brought with him established the Institute of Egypt. His troops were ordered to rebuild the old Arabic fortress, Fort St. Julien, in Rosetta (now Raschid), a city on the coast of the West Nile Delta. A soldier, Lieutenant Pierre Francois Xavier Bouchard, discovered the stone while pulling down an old wall in the summer of 1799. Thinking it would be useful, he showed it to the commander. His find would cause great excitement for many European Egyptologists and scholars, especially since the ancient Egyptians were considered "legends of the past" in the years AD.⁸ Virtually all understanding of the ancient Egyptian writing had

⁴ Donoghue, Carol. The Mystery of Hieroglyphs: The Story of the Rosetta Stone and the Race to Decipher Egyptian Hieroglyphs. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. 10.

⁵ Parkinson 201.

⁶ Parkinson 26.

⁷ "The Story of the Rosetta Stone 'Finding a Lost Language'." 1997. Minnesota State University E-museum. 28 December 2004.
<<http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/prehistory/egypt/hieroglyphics/rosettastone.html>>

⁸ The Rosetta Stone. History Channel Classroom. History Channel. October 2004.

been lost since the fourth century AD.⁹ Could this interesting stone be the long-searched-for key to unlocking the mysteries of ancient Egypt?

A report on the discovery of the Rosetta Stone was sent to Paris from the Institute in Cairo on September 15, 1799. Napoleon had copies of the inscriptions made that were then sent all over Europe. A French translation of the Greek section of the stone was made by Citizen Du Theil of the Institute Nationale de Paris revealing that the stone “was a monument to the gratitude of some priests of Alexandria, or some neighbouring place, towards Ptolemy Epiphanes.”¹⁰ Soon afterwards, in 1801, British forces attacked Napoleon’s troops, determined to recapture Egypt. The French were sorely beaten and had to give all of their collected antiquities from the expedition to the British, among them the Rosetta Stone. If one were to look closely at the actual stone, one could see the words “CAPTURED IN EGYPT BY THE BRITISH ARMY IN 1801.”¹¹ Plaster casts were made of the tablet. Copies were sent to universities in England and Dublin, Ireland. The Rosetta Stone was taken to the British Museum in 1802, where it remains today.

Some scholars attempted to decipher the stone very soon after the copies reached Europe. One, Jean Jacques Barthelemy, focused on cartouches (oval-shaped signs that surround royal names in the hieroglyphic script). He soon realized that cartouches surrounded the names of kings or queens. Once he made that discovery, he began to work out the meanings of hieroglyphs in the names of kings and queens that were known to him. Another man who made some important discoveries was a Swedish scholar named Johann David Akerblad. He was familiar with the Coptic language (the latest form of demotic) and guessed that it was derived from ancient Egyptian. He began

⁹ “The Finding of the Rosetta Stone.” 2004. The Cleveland Museum of Art. 28 December 2004. <<http://www.clevelandart.com/archive/pharaoh/glyphs.html>>

¹⁰ Budge, Ernest Alfred Wallis. The Rosetta Stone. London: Cambridge University Press, 1913. 3.

¹¹ Donoghue 22.

looking at the names of kings and queens and in doing so identified sixteen phonograms (signs for sounds). A. I. Sylvestre de Sacy worked on the demotic text, finding equivalents for proper names found in the Greek section.¹²

Meanwhile, an English doctor, Thomas Young, was developing a strong interest in Egyptian hieroglyphs. Young knew Latin and Greek, as well as several other languages. He is mainly known for his experiments with light, although his work on the hieroglyphic and demotic scripts made considerable steps with the deciphering of the Rosetta Stone. From his interest in language came this curiosity about the Egyptian scripts. He got a copy of the Rosetta Stone's writings in 1814. He then sent a letter to Johann David Akerblad, who knew Coptic. This language was something that Young had not studied, so he asked Akerblad what kind of progress he had made. Akerblad sent him some copies of the signs that he had deciphered, which were mostly correct. At first, Young focused on the demotic script, using a method that consisted of finding common words in the Greek writing, counting them, and then finding a corresponding word in the demotic. There were two problems with his technique. First, the demotic script was broken off at the right edge of the stone. Second, the Greek and demotic inscriptions were not exactly the same, word for word.¹³ He later focused on the cartouches in the hieroglyphic script. Young found many recognizable names, but after these discoveries, he came to a huge roadblock. Young thought that all other hieroglyphic words were for objects or ideas; all of their meanings were lost forever and would be impossible to decipher.¹⁴ He excused his phonetic discoveries by noting that the Ptolemaic dynasty

¹² Sewall, Max.

¹³ Donoghue 27.

¹⁴ Donoghue 29.

was not of Egyptian descent, so their Greek names would have to be spelled out.¹⁵ Both of these beliefs were terribly wrong and finally caused Young to give up on the task. Young called his achievements “the amusement of a few leisure hours.”¹⁶ He published his findings in the *Supplement to the Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1819. He then wrote a letter to a young man named Jean-Francois Champollion, discussing the results of Young’s work on the stone (see appendix item 3). Young thought that Champollion might want somewhere to begin with his decoding of the Rosetta Stone.

Jean-Francois Champollion had been interested in languages at an early age. His older brother, Jacques-Joseph, sparked his interest in Egypt. Since he was Jean-Francois’ teacher and mentor for much of the younger boy’s childhood, Jacques read all about Egypt and Napoleon’s army to his little brother. Jean-Francois learned several languages at an early age, including Latin, Greek, Arabic, and Coptic. At the young age of sixteen, he read a paper to the Grenoble Academy proposing the idea that the language of the Copts in contemporary Egypt was the same language spoken by the ancient Egyptians.

In 1807, Champollion went to Paris and received a copy of the inscription on the Rosetta Stone. He got off to an extremely slow start. He had studied many earlier theories, including the theories of Diodorus and Horapello. Diodorus, a Greek writer (mid-100’s BC), believed that all hieroglyphs stood for things and ideas, not sounds. In the fifth century AD, Horapello, a Greek-speaking Egyptian priest, wrote a book that basically explained and elaborated on Diodorus’ theory. Their theories influenced Champollion’s first attempts to crack the code.

¹⁵ Singh, Simon. “The Decipherment of Hieroglyphs.” 10 January 2001. BBC History: Egyptians. 28 December 2004. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/egyptians/decipherment_01.shtml>

¹⁶ Singh, Simon.

Then, a friend of his brought him some carefully copied hieroglyphic texts from the Egyptian temple of Abu Simbel. In them, he found a cartouche he had not seen before. From deciphering other cartouches, Champollion recognized the last two signs—s-s. His knowledge of Coptic helped him. He thought the beginning sign, the disk, could be equal to the Coptic sign for the sun, “ra”. The only pharaonic (having to do with pharaohs) name that fit was Rameses. Immediately after making this discovery, he ran down the hall to his brother’s office, said “Je tiens l’affaire!” (I’ve got it!), and promptly fainted.¹⁷ Finally after nearly 1,500 years of silence, ancient Egyptian writing could be read!¹⁸ With that discovery, he proved wrong his and Young’s theory that all signs (except for the characters in cartouches) stood for ideas. He also found out, with the use of Coptic, that some words were at least partly phonetic. Even so, the scripts still had ideograms (pictures for things or ideas). That breakthrough was a turning point in his thought processes during the deciphering of the stone. He quickly made up for lost time after this important new insight.

In September 1822, Champollion wrote his famous *Lettre A M. Dacier* (see appendix item 4), which was read before the French Royal Academy of Inscriptions in Paris, that “revealed his embryonic results.”¹⁹ In 1824, he wrote a book to follow the *Lettre* called *Precis du Systeme Hieroglyphique*, which formed the basis for later conclusions in the Egyptology world. He also published a book entitled *Egypt Under the Pharaohs* in 1814, which contained some more of the results of his investigations.²⁰

¹⁷ Singh, Simon.

¹⁸ “The Finding of the Rosetta Stone.”

¹⁹ “Jean-Francois Champollion (1790-1832).” 1996. KMT Communications. 16 October 2004. <http://www.egyptology.com/kmt/winter95_96/giants.html>

²⁰ Warhola, Brian. “Young Scholar Attempts to Decipher Hieroglyphs of Ancient Egypt.” December 2004. Old News. 28 December 2004. <<http://www.oldnewspublishing.com/champoll.htm>>

In 1828, his lifelong dream of traveling to Egypt was fulfilled. His trip was spent deciphering texts found on temple walls as well as collecting and copying these texts. He died on March 4, 1832 of a stroke; he was not quite forty-two years old. Champollion, of course, did not get to completely finish his deciphering, but he made the necessary first steps to what is known about the Egyptian language today.

The Rosetta Stone literally was the key to understanding the Egyptian hieroglyphic and demotic scripts, as well as the Egyptian civilization. The comprehension of the Egyptian language led to a better understanding of the Egyptian culture. It helped us to read their literature, which showed how the Egyptians wrote, what they wrote about, and what purposes their writing served. In reading Egyptian literature, we also found out what was important in the ancient society, in addition to obtaining knowledge about significant ancient Egyptian customs.

The Rosetta Stone was a crucial piece in the puzzle over the Egyptian hieroglyphs and their mysterious and very obscure meanings. If it were not for the hard work and perseverance of Thomas Young, Jean-Francois Champollion, and their more modern counterparts, we would not have as advanced an understanding of the ancient Egyptian civilization as we do today.