

The Decipherment of the Rosetta Stone

A

In 1799, during Napoleon Bonaparte's military campaign in Egypt, a French soldier unearthed a slab of granodiorite near the town of Rosetta (modern-day Rashid). This artifact, later dubbed the Rosetta Stone, would become the key to unlocking the long-lost script of ancient Egypt. Before its discovery, Egyptian hieroglyphs remained a mystery—beautiful but indecipherable symbols that adorned temples and tombs, their meanings obscured by millennia. The Rosetta Stone's eventual decipherment was not only a linguistic breakthrough but also a profound moment in archaeology, enabling scholars to access the vast intellectual and cultural history of a once-great civilization.

B

What made the Rosetta Stone so remarkable was its inscription. The same message was written in three scripts: Greek, Demotic, and hieroglyphic. At the time, scholars still understood Ancient Greek, providing a vital starting point. The Greek portion of the text revealed that the stone contained a decree issued in 196 BCE by Ptolemy V, affirming the royal cult of the king. With Greek as a reference, scholars hoped to use the trilingual inscription as a cipher to decode the other two scripts, particularly the hieroglyphs.

C

Initial efforts to decipher the stone were slow and contentious. Many European scholars attempted to make sense of the enigmatic hieroglyphs, often assuming they represented purely symbolic concepts rather than phonetic sounds. British scientist Thomas Young made early headway by

comparing the Demotic and Greek texts, identifying that Demotic was partly phonetic and partly ideographic. He correctly proposed that some of the cartouches—oval shapes enclosing hieroglyphs—represented royal names and that these might be read phonetically.

D

However, it was the French linguist Jean-François Champollion who is widely credited with the full decipherment of hieroglyphs. Fluent in Coptic, a language derived from ancient Egyptian and still used in Christian liturgy, Champollion realized that Coptic could be a bridge to understanding ancient Egyptian sounds. He built on Young's insights and demonstrated that hieroglyphs combined phonetic signs with logographic and determinative elements. In 1822, Champollion presented a paper in Paris detailing how he had decoded the names of Ptolemy and Cleopatra from the cartouches using phonetic principles. This announcement marked the moment when hieroglyphs ceased to be an unsolvable riddle.

E

Champollion's work faced skepticism, especially from those who clung to the belief that hieroglyphs were exclusively symbolic. Nevertheless, his methodical approach and use of Coptic proved convincing. Over the next decade, he expanded his translations and published a comprehensive Egyptian grammar and dictionary. His work laid the foundation for modern Egyptology, a discipline that would come to rely on textual evidence to reconstruct ancient Egypt's history, religion, and daily life.

F

The decipherment of the Rosetta Stone was not only an academic triumph but also a cultural turning point. For centuries, ancient Egypt had been

regarded as a land of mystique and wonder, its monuments inspiring awe but little understanding. With the ability to read hieroglyphs, scholars could now access inscriptions on temple walls, administrative documents, and religious texts. The result was a more nuanced and human picture of ancient Egypt, one that challenged earlier romanticized or mythologized views.

G

Today, the Rosetta Stone remains a symbol of intellectual discovery. Housed in the British Museum since 1802, it attracts millions of visitors each year. Its historical importance extends beyond Egyptology; it represents the power of cross-disciplinary scholarship and the value of persistence in unraveling ancient mysteries. The story of its decipherment underscores how language serves as a bridge to understanding civilizations long gone—and how, through the careful work of linguists and historians, the voices of the past can be heard once more.

Questions

Question Type 1: Matching Information to Paragraphs

(Questions 1–5)

Match the following statements to the correct paragraphs (A–G). You may use each letter once only.

1. *An early researcher proposed that hieroglyphs might contain phonetic elements.*
 2. *A modern perception of Ancient Egypt changed due to a linguistic breakthrough.*
 3. *This paragraph outlines the appearance and basic contents of the artifact.*
 4. *This paragraph discusses the symbolic importance of the Rosetta Stone today.*
 5. *The first comprehensive grammar and dictionary of ancient Egyptian were produced.*
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Question Type 2: Yes / No / Not Given

(Questions 6–9)

Do the following statements agree with the claims of the writer?

Write: YES if the statement agrees with the claims of the writer

NO if the statement contradicts the claims of the writer

NOT GIVEN if it is impossible to say what the writer thinks about this

6. Napoleon himself discovered the Rosetta Stone while in Egypt.

7. Champollion's knowledge of Coptic played a crucial role in his decipherment.
 8. The Greek inscription included religious references to Ancient Egyptian gods.
 9. Thomas Young was the first person to recognize the meaning of every cartouche.
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Question Type 3: Summary Completion

(Questions 10–13)

Complete the summary below using words from the passage.

Use **NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS** for each answer.

Early attempts to decipher the Rosetta Stone involved comparing the Greek and Demotic texts. Thomas Young recognized that some of the signs might represent the names of 10. _____, and he identified that the Demotic script used both phonetic and 11. _____ elements. Later, Champollion applied his knowledge of 12. _____ to connect the hieroglyphic script with its sounds. He eventually produced a full 13. _____ and dictionary, which laid the foundation for modern Egyptology.

Answer Key

1. C
2. F
3. B
4. G
5. E
6. NO
7. YES
8. NOT GIVEN
9. NO
10. royal names
11. ideographic
12. Coptic
13. grammar