

## ARCHAEOLOGY

# The race to decipher Egyptian hieroglyphs

A pair of scholars recount the rivalry that defined efforts to interpret the Rosetta stone

By **Andrew Robinson**

**T**he Rosetta stone, inscribed in 196 BCE during the reign of the Greco-Egyptian ruler Ptolemy V and discovered in Egypt by engineers of Napoleon Bonaparte's army in 1799, is a bilingual inscription written in two of the ancient Egyptian scripts—hieroglyphic and demotic—and the Greek alphabet. From 1815 to 1823, it served as the key that unlocked the decipherment of the Egyptian hieroglyphs through the largely independent labors of the English polymath Thomas Young and the French linguist and archaeologist Jean-François Champollion, who is generally regarded as the founder of Egyptology.

Numerous Rosetta stone-related academic and popular studies have been published, including various biographies of both Champollion and Young, who strongly differed in intellectual outlook and personality. *The Riddle of the Rosetta* offers further commentary on these two individuals, their scholarship, and their rivalry, based on almost a decade of research by the book's authors, Jed Buchwald and Diane Greco Josefowicz.

By comparing the Rosetta stone's hieroglyphic and demotic inscriptions, Young correctly concluded in 1815 that demotic script consisted of "imitations of the hieroglyphics...mixed with the letters of the alphabet." He next read the hieroglyphic name of Ptolemy on the stone by analyzing it phonetically, justifying this approach on the grounds that it was a non-Egyptian name. But, like the ancient Greeks and Romans, Young wrongly assumed that the native Egyptian words in the hieroglyphic script were probably nonphonetic, representing ideas rather than sounds.

In April 1821, Champollion categorically stated in a misguided publication (which

he later withdrew) that the three ancient Egyptian scripts—hieroglyphic, hieratic, and demotic—represented things or ideas, not sounds. He reaffirmed this belief in October 1822 on the first page of his most famous publication, *Lettre à M. Dacier*: "I hope it is not too rash for me to say that I have succeeded in demonstrating that these two forms of writing [hieratic and demotic] are neither of them alphabetic, as has been so generally thought, but ideographic, like the hieroglyphs themselves, that is to say, depicting the ideas and not the sounds of the language."

Although Champollion's statement seemed to exclude even the slightest possibility of a



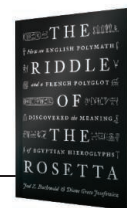
The French linguist Jean-François Champollion (left) ultimately cracked the Rosetta code, aided by earlier insights provided by the English polymath Thomas Young (right).

phonetic element in Egyptian scripts, this appears to have been unintentional, because he made one crucial exception in the *Lettre*, undoubtedly influenced by Young's prior work: Hieroglyphs could represent sounds when used phonetically to write foreign proper names in cartouches. This allowed Champollion to justify the *Lettre's* phonetic transliterations of the cartouches of many foreign rulers of Egypt, such as Alexander, Cleopatra, and Ptolemy, and its celebrated list of hieroglyphic and demotic "phonetic signs" supposedly used for writing only these foreign names.

Soon after, however, Champollion radically changed his mind about the Egyptian scripts upon reading the name of Ramesses,

## The Riddle of the Rosetta

Jed Z. Buchwald and  
Diane Greco Josefowicz  
Princeton University Press,  
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a historically known, native Egyptian pharaoh, written in a cartouche—a possibility hinted at by Young in 1819. Having applied his growing hieroglyphic "alphabet" to many native Egyptian words, Champollion was thrilled to find that it produced credible transliterations of them that were recognizable from Coptic vocabularies. In April 1823, he announced to the Academy of Inscriptions in Paris that there was, after all, a major phonetic hieroglyphic component that had existed long before the Greco-Roman period—the essential insight that enabled his decipherments in Egypt in 1828–29.

In my view, as a biographer of both Champollion and Young, the single most fascinating aspect of the decipherment is that both a polymath and a specialist were required. Young's myriad-mindedness provided some vital clues early on, but unlike Champollion, Young was far from obsessed with ancient Egypt. His versatility obstructed him from making further progress. Conversely, Champollion's single-mindedness hindered him from spotting these clues, but once they were in place, his tunnel vision allowed him to begin to perceive the system behind the signs. What a pity that the two scholars, despite being in touch, never truly collaborated. (The "intemperate" Champollion refused to admit his debt to Young.)

Combining exhaustive excavation of British and French archives with eclectic biographical elements, this valuable new book explains, so far as the surviving evidence allows, the twists and turns behind the perpetually fascinating decipherment. Although aimed primarily at scholars of this subject, the book will surely intrigue any reader attracted to the ethos of the Enlightenment. ■

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