



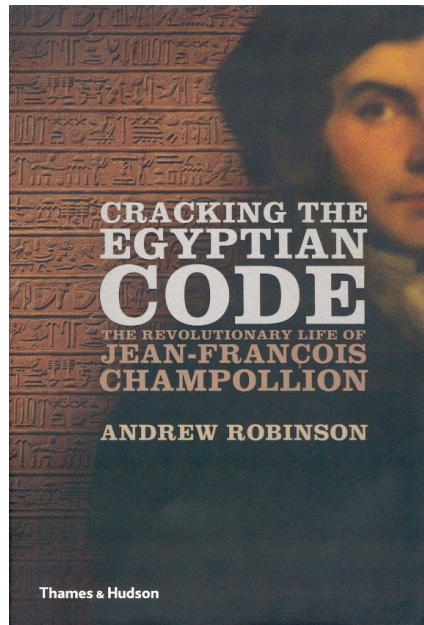
Review in *Egyptian Archaeology* 41 (Autumn 2012)

Andrew Robinson, *Cracking The Egyptian Code. The Revolutionary Life of Jean-François Champollion*. Thames & Hudson, 2012. (ISBN 978 0 5000 5171 9). Price: £19.95. A full-length biography of Champollion as one of the pioneers in the decipherment of hieroglyphs has been sorely lacking in English. Mention of Champollion and decipherment in English publications is restricted in its focus and does not flesh out the man. This is where Robinson fills the gap using the earlier German and French biographies – Hartleben (2 vols in German 1906, abridged in French 1984) and Lacouture (in French, 1988) – and his own research. It is quite incredible that none of Champollion's own publications (except for his *Egyptian Diaries*, 2009) have appeared in English, not even his seminal *Lettre à M. Dacier*, and Robinson's knowledge and own translations from these are of inestimable value for understanding Champollion. There is no denying that from an early age he was as a man possessed in his application to 'cracking the code' of hieroglyphs. His dedication, however, led to the treatment of, and attitudes to, other scholars which leave much to be desired – he seems to have been a very unpleasant person – and his revolutionary ideals got him exiled from his native Grenoble in 1816–17. It was only the continued support, financial and moral, of his elder brother, Champollion-Figeac (he changed his name to differentiate them) that made Champollion *le jeune's* Egyptian studies possible.

Almost all of the first half of the book is devoted to Champollion's early life. Robinson takes issue on several points with the early biographers, especially Hartleben (24 citations in the index), often correcting statements of fact, but credit should be given for Hartleben's pioneering work. Giovanni Belzoni is, literally, a towering figure of the period, and is cited, in passing, 12 times in the Index. Unfortunately, on pp.10–11, where more information about him is given, it is all totally wrong. Belzoni found Seti I's tomb in 1817 (on 16 October), not 1818; Seti's sarcophagus did not form the *'pièce de résistance'* of Belzoni's exhibition as is implied in the text, although it is admitted that it arrived after the inauguration of the exhibition; Sarah Belzoni did not sell Seti's sarcophagus to Sir John Soane for £2,000, it was Bingham Richards acting for Henry Salt who did – and Sarah got not a penny of the money.

Despite his somewhat unacceptable character, Champollion's star was rising, especially after he found support from the Duc de Blacas, an influential courtier and collector, who became his second mentor after his elder brother. It was thanks to Blacas that Champollion was introduced to the French king, and undertook his study tour of Egyptian antiquities in Italy and his voyage to Egypt to record inscriptions and to test his decipherment.

What Champollion would never recognise was his debt to Thomas Young who, in his 1819 paper, had changed Champollion's ideas



on to the right track for the decipherment. Young was a physicist whose name resounds in other sciences, notably for his work on optics, and had he not been diverted he would have certainly arrived at the decipherment of hieroglyphs before Champollion. Young was a polymath who shared his many discoveries and insights in science as well as those on the Rosetta Stone (of which, unlike Champollion, he published a translation). Silvestre de Sacy, Champollion's teacher (and there was animosity between them) had himself made discoveries from the Rosetta Stone, and had warned Young in a letter about Champollion's habit of gathering and using (unacknowledged) other people's research, likening him to a jay or magpie. Even after Young's early death in 1829, Champollion refused to acknowledge his 'road to Damascus' moment arising from Young's 1819 paper, even later making false accusations against his rival. Robinson well charts the story using his own translations from the original sources (all duly referenced) to make this an absorbing study of a man who, whilst acknowledged as a genius, became one often by standing on the (unacknowledged) shoulders of others. In Chapter 16, 'The Hieroglyphs after Champollion', Robinson notes that Champollion had few supporters and had twice been rejected as a candidate for the Academy of Inscriptions, only achieving membership in 1830. After his death in March 1832, it was left to later scholars to refine and correct much in his several publications. On de Sacy's recommendation, Champollion's papers were bought by the French government for 50,000 francs, while his impoverished widow and daughter were granted a pension of 3,000 francs.

Robinson's biography is a most welcome and long-overdue study in English of an enigmatic and still controversial genius. This splendidly produced and absorbing book should be in every Egyptologist's library.

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