



The Code Breakers

Andrew Robinson investigates the lives of three men who spent their lives obsessed with deciphering the ancient languages of the Maya, the Egyptians and the Minoans



Many scholars, whether famous ones like the archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans and the polymath Thomas Young, or not-quite-so-famous ones such as the 19th-century cuneiform experts Sir Henry Rawlinson and Edward Hincks, have contributed crucially to the decipherment of the scripts of ancient civilisations. But only a tiny handful of them has earned the glory of ‘cracking’ an ancient script virtually single-handed.

The most important of this select group and, in my view, the most intriguing as individuals, are a trio, namely: Michael Ventris, the Englishman who, in the 1950s, deciphered Minoan Linear B, the earliest readable writing of Europe; Yuri Knorosov, the Russian who deciphered the Mayan glyphs of Central America, also in the 1950s, and Jean-François Champollion, the Frenchman who, in the 1820s,

1. The Rosetta Stone was discovered by the French army in 1799 and first studied by Champollion in 1808. © British Museum, London.

2. Yuri Valentinovich Knorosov with his cat in Leningrad in 1960. Photograph courtesy of YV Knorosov.

3. Detail from portrait of Jean-François Champollion painted in 1832 (the year of his death) by Léon Cogniet. Musée du Louvre, Paris. © The Art Archive/Alamy.

4. Michael Ventris examining a Linear B tablet in the British Museum © Camera Press/Photo: Tom Blau.

deciphered Egyptian hieroglyphs.

Although their three approaches to decipherment differed considerably and their personalities were remarkably unlike, Ventris, Knorosov and Champollion had at least one characteristic in common: each was obsessed for many years with the archaeological problem he was trying to solve. Each decipherer could, in my opinion, justifiably be called a genius because his work of changed the history of the world.

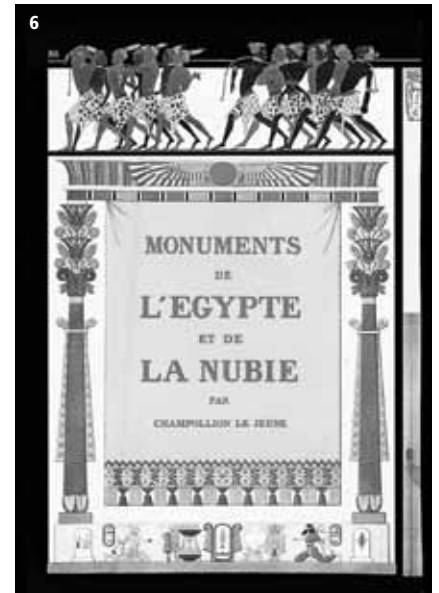
Michael Ventris’ decipherment gave Europe a history half a millennium older than the earliest Greek inscriptions. Yuri Knorosov’s showed that the New World had a literate and artistically sophisticated civilisation – that of the classic Maya – more than a millennium before the arrival in America of the Spanish conquistadors. Jean-François Champollion’s doubled the span of recorded history from 600 BC to *circa* 3000 BC – the beginning

of the pharaonic dynasties.

In some ways, Ventris is the greatest of the three decipherers. He had to make do with by far the smallest corpus of inscriptions, compared with the treasure troves from Egypt and Central America. He had no bilingual inscription (such as the Rosetta Stone used by Champollion or the 16th-century Spanish-Mayan ‘alphabet’ available to Knorosov) to provide a clue to the meaning of those unknown signs. And he had no access to a known living language that could be historically related to the unknown ancient language of Linear B – nothing like the Coptic language of Egypt, which was thought to be descended from ancient Egyptian, or the Mayan languages of modern Mexico, which were almost certainly related to the language of the ancient Maya. Although, eventually, Ventris proved that the language of Linear B was an archaic dialect of ancient



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5. Illustration of a bas relief from Abu Simbel showing Ramesses II in a chariot, from Champollion's *Monuments de L'Égypte et de la Nubie*. © Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

6. Title page from Champollion's *Monuments de L'Égypte et de la Nubie*, published posthumously by his brother in 1835-45. © Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

7. Folio 10 from the autograph manuscript of Champollion's *Egyptian Grammar* published in 1836. © Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

8. 'CHAMPOLEON' inscribed on a pillar (presumably in 1829) at the Temple of Karnak in Luxor. © Tony Roddam/Alamy.

9. View of 'Cleopatra's Obelisk' in Alexandria, painted by Dominique Vivant Denon in July 1798, soon after the arrival of the French expedition in Egypt. © Searight Collection, London.



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Greek, 500 years older than Homer, this relationship with Greek was absolutely unknown at the time of the ancient script's discovery.

In addition, unlike Champollion and Knorosov, Ventris was not a professional linguist with a university training in languages; he never attended a university and, in fact, trained as a modernist architect in London. For him decipherment was always a distracting hobby that had gripped him as a boy at the public school Stowe in the mid-1930s.

Yet it was architecture that in a sense came to his aid. In the true words of Ventris' later collaborator, the Cambridge University classicist John Chadwick: 'The architect's eye sees in a building not a mere façade, a jumble of ornamental and structural features; it looks beneath the appearance and distinguishes the significant parts of the pattern, the structural elements and framework of the building. So, too,

Ventris was able to discern among the bewildering variety of the mysterious [Linear B] signs, patterns and regularities that betrayed the underlying structure. It is this quality, the power of seeing order in apparent confusion, that has marked the work of all great men.'

So, what exactly is Linear B? Its full name, 'Linear Script of Class B', was given by its discoverer, Evans, when he began excavating what he believed was the 'Palace of Minos' at Knossos on Crete in 1900. The signs of the newly discovered ancient script were fairly primitive characters scratched on clay tablets – with none of the aesthetic appeal of Egyptian hieroglyphs and Mayan glyphs – which are nowadays dated to around 1450 BC. The 'Class B' label was to distinguish the characters from similar-looking but, nevertheless, distinct characters on archaeologically older tablets (now dated to 1750-1450 BC) that Evans

had labelled 'Linear Script of Class A', which had been found at Knossos but chiefly at another Minoan palace excavation in southern Crete. (Minoan Linear A remains undeciphered even today.) 'Linear' – not because the symbols were written in sequence but because they consisted of lines inscribed on a surface, as opposed to the three-dimensional, engraved images of a third, pictographic script, found chiefly on seal stones and only in the eastern part of Crete, which Evans dubbed 'hieroglyphic' but which actually did not much resemble Egyptian writing. (Cretan Hieroglyphic is also still undeciphered.)

And who was Michael Ventris? If there is one word that sums him up, it is 'unconventional'. Almost everyone who knew him remarked on the ease and charm of his company, but he could also be exceptionally withdrawn and uncommunicative. He was a dazzling polyglot who



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took pride in speaking most major European languages, yet he felt close to hardly anyone, and these few were mainly English speakers. As an architect and decipherer he believed firmly in collaboration and cross-fertilisation, yet he kept his many personal relationships in remarkably separate compartments. His tastes in architecture were thoroughly modern (Bauhaus) and anti-Classical, but his interest in Linear B required an intimate knowledge of the Classical world; he had a substantial private income, but he was not interested in living the lifestyle of the rich and had socialist tendencies; even physically he looked much more like a tanned, glamorous sportsman (he was an avid skier) than an etiolated scholar, a City gent far more than an absent-minded professor. It would be easy

10. The Franco-Tuscan Expedition to Egypt, 1829 by Giuseppe Angelelli. Champollion is seated (slightly to the right of centre) with a sword and wearing Eastern garb including a red cap. Archaeological Museum, Florence. © Scala, Florence, courtesy of the Ministero Beni e Att. Culturali.

11. Egyptian obelisk in Rome commissioned by Emperor Hadrian in AD 130, as copied by Athanasius Kircher in 1652-54 and published in his *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*. © Carl A Kroch Library, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, USA.



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to continue with this list of paradoxes. Above all, Ventris showed a modesty that verged on diffidence – ‘almost alarmingly so’, according to an architect friend, despite having as much (indeed more) to boast of than a Nobel prize-winner. When he died, aged only 34, in a car accident outside London, his undoubtedly disturbed mental state at the time led some to conclude that this brilliant man may have taken his own life, apparently in despair at his lack of creativity as an architect.

Champollion, by total contrast, dedicated his life to one goal with the passion, courage and indeed arrogance of a French intellectual born during the Revolution. Despite coming from a modest provincial family, at the age of 15, after some early exposure to Egyptian monuments and manuscripts brought back to France by the savants of Napoleon Bonaparte’s expedition, Champollion declared to the father of a school friend in Grenoble: ‘I wish to devote my life to knowledge of ancient Egypt.’

His English rival, the polymath Thomas Young, who had begun the decipherment of the Rosetta Stone in 1814, had no desire whatsoever to visit Egypt. In founding an Egyptian Society in London in 1817, to publish as many ancient inscriptions and manuscripts as possible, Young remarked that funds were needed ‘for employing some poor Italian or Maltese to scramble over Egypt in search of more’. Compare this statement with Champollion’s excited

description of entering the temple at Abu Simbel of Ramesses the Great – a pharaoh whose hieroglyphic name Champollion was the first to translate, in 1822 – on his pioneering Franco-Tuscan expedition to Egypt in 1828-29, funded by Charles X of France and Grand Duke Leopold II of Tuscany. Writing to his elder brother and mentor back in Paris, Champollion enthused:

‘The great temple of Ibsamboul is worth the voyage to Nubia all by itself: it is a marvel that would stand out as wonderful even at Thebes. The labour that its excavation must have cost frightens the imagination... But it is a tough business to visit it... I undressed almost completely, down to my Arab shirt and long linen underpants, and pushed myself flat on my stomach through the small opening in the doorway that, if cleared of sand, would be at least 25 feet in height. I thought I was entering the mouth of a furnace, and, when I had slid entirely into the temple, I found myself in an atmosphere heated to 52 degrees: we went through this astonishing excavation, Rosellini, Ricci, I and one of the Arabs holding a candle in his hand.’

Perhaps the strangest fact about our third code breaker, Knorosov, is that he deciphered the Mayan glyphs without any personal contact with original Mayan inscriptions, Mayanist scholars or Mexico. For he was a Marxist student of linguistics and anthropology in Moscow and Leningrad in the



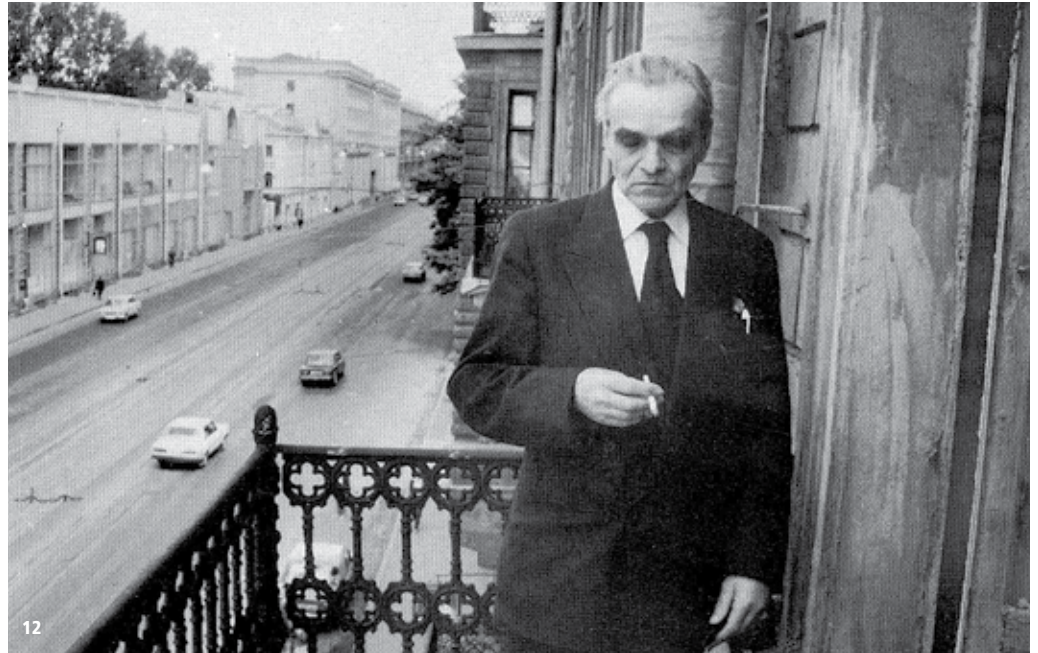
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12. Knorosov in Leningrad in 1989. Photo: Michael D Coe.

13. Page 49 from the Mayan book, known as the Dresden Codex, as published in 1880 by Ernst Förstemann. In it Knorosov located glyphs that could be associated with pictures, such as a dog and a turkey, and so with syllabically spelt words in the living Mayan language.

14. Linear B tablet published by Arthur Evans in *American British School in Athens VII*, 1900.

15. Ventris at Stowe in 1936, the year he first encountered Linear B. Photo: R & H Chapman. Courtesy of Tony Meredith.



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years immediately after the Second World War, during the final years of Stalin's regime and the depths of the Cold War, when foreign travel to the Americas, or even correspondence with American scholars, was completely forbidden, on pain of being sent to the Gulag. Knorosov was able to visit Mexico only after the fall of Communism in 1989.

His isolation may, however, have been a blessing in disguise, because it liberated him from the dominant Western scholarly perception that the Mayan glyphs were not a writing system at all but, instead, a system of mystical symbols devised by a Maya theocracy of star-gazing astronomer-priests. (A somewhat similar misperception had hamstrung the efforts of scholars of the Egyptian hieroglyphs before the time of Young and Champollion.) Knorosov did, however, have access to relevant Western publications on the Mayan script, including reproductions of Mayan manuscripts. One of these was the *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* (*An Account of the Things of Yucatan*) by the 16th-century Spanish bishop of Yucatan, Diego de Landa, which contained what claimed to be a Mayan 'alphabet' with equivalent Spanish sounds. Knorosov wrote his doctoral dissertation on Landa's *Relación*, and came to the contrary conclusion that the so-called Mayan 'alphabet' was in fact a syllabary.

His supervisor at Leningrad State University encouraged him: 'If you believe that any writing system produced by humans can be read by humans, why don't you try to crack the Maya system?' By intelligent sleuthing, Knorosov went on to discover many syllabic signs in Mayan manuscripts and inscriptions. In 1952, he proposed that the basis of the Mayan glyphs, like that of the Egyptian hieroglyphs, was a

system of phonetic signs, combined with a much larger number of non-phonetic, often pictographic signs. Many of his phonetic readings of ancient words could be confirmed by consulting dictionaries of living Mayan languages. The official announcement of Knorosov's decipherment was couched in obligatory Soviet phraseology, attacking Western scholars for their 'bourgeois idealism' and 'reactionary' approach. Inevitably, the leading Western Mayanist, Sir Eric Thompson, ridiculed the Soviet decipherment in return. But some of the younger Mayanists in North America, such as Michael Coe, who were less enamoured of the perception of the Maya as mystical priests, were convinced by Knorosov's basic argument, if not by all of his detailed claims. It would take another three decades and more (until the late 1980s and 1990s) for the decipherment of the Mayan glyphs to become firmly established, as had also been true of Champollion's Egyptian decipherment, which was incontrovertibly confirmed only in 1866.

But as Coe, the historian of the Maya decipherment, rightly remarked in 2011: 'The articles and studies that Knorosov published from 1952 through the end of the decade establish him as an innovative decipherer in the tradition of Jean-François Champollion, Henry Rawlinson, and Michael Ventris.' ■

• *Cracking the Egyptian Code: The Revolutionary Life of Jean-François Champollion* (hb, £19.95) and *The Man Who Deciphered Linear B: The Story of Michael Ventris* (pb, £8.95) – both by Andrew Robinson – and *Breaking the Maya Code* (pb, 2012, £14.95) by Michael D Coe are all published by Thames & Hudson.