



Mme de Rumilly. *Portrait of Jean-François Champollion, holding his 'Table of phonetic signs'*. c.1823. Musée Champollion, Vif.

Revolutionary codebreaker

Jean-François Champollion is credited with deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphs. **Andrew Robinson** describes the man and his achievement

The Rosetta Stone, discovered in Egypt in 1799 and transferred to Britain in 1801, is possibly the most famous object in the British Museum. Its bilingual contribution to the decipherment of ancient Egyptian writing is part of general knowledge, even if the details of its two Egyptian inscriptions (hieroglyphic and demotic) and its Greek alphabetic inscription, announcing Ptolemy V's edict, are less familiar.

Not so well known are its two chief decipherers: the British physician and polymath Thomas Young (1773–1829), who started the decipherment but failed to complete it, and his rival, the French epigraphist and archaeologist Jean-François Champollion (1790–1832), who cracked the hieroglyphic code and became the founder of Egyptology as a science. *The Last Man Who Knew Everything*, my biography of Young, was published in 2006 (see this Magazine, issue 58). Now, with *Cracking the Egyptian Code* – the first biography of Champollion written in English – I am giving him his proper due as well.

Although both men could be considered geniuses, Champollion's life and personality were about as far from Young's as it is possible to be. Born in 1790, he was a child of the French Revolution. His first decade was spent in rural Figeac at the very edge of the Massif Central, the son of a bohemian bookseller and an illiterate French mother (although his real mother may have been a Gypsy or even an Arab/Egyptian woman). The family house, now a museum, near a grand replica of the Rosetta Stone created for Champollion's bicentenary, was close to the town's guillotine.

Although wayward, young Champollion showed promise in languages. In 1801, he was taken in hand by his devoted, much older brother, Jacques-Joseph, who would support him throughout his life. Uprooted from Figeac, he was enrolled



Far left: Detail of the Rosetta Stone, showing the three scripts – hieroglyphic, demotic and Greek alphabetic. Left: The Rosetta Stone. Egypt, Ptolemaic Period, 196 BC.



Detail from Champollion's 'Table of phonetic signs', from *Lettre à M. Dacier*. 1822. Académie des Inscriptions, vol. 25, 1921–22.

in a lycée in Grenoble, the capital of the Isère department, where Jacques-Joseph was working. Despite his poverty and dislike of the official education system, Jean-François became a star pupil.

The great mathematician Joseph Fourier, Napoleon Bonaparte's former chief savant in Egypt and now prefect of Isère, supposedly invited the 12-year-old Jean-François to see his collection of ancient Egyptian artefacts, which overwhelmed the boy. This story is, however, probably apocryphal and it is more likely that Champollion saw the collection not alone but with others when he was a little older. By then, the

Champollion brothers were jointly assisting Fourier in writing his preface to the monumental *Description de l'Égypte*. In 1807, Jean-François informed his parents: 'I wish to make of this ancient nation a thorough and continual study ... Of all the peoples whom I admire the most, I shall confess to you that not one of them outweighs the Egyptians in my heart!'

From 1807 to 1809 Champollion was a student of oriental languages, including Coptic, in Paris, working mainly under the celebrated Sylvestre de Sacy. Aged only 18, he was then appointed a professor at the new university in Grenoble. He immersed himself in

ancient Egypt and published his first book, in which he avoided the issue of how to read hieroglyphs.

In 1808, he attempted to decipher the Rosetta Stone (using a copy made at the British Museum, borrowed from a French scholar), but soon abandoned the attempt. Six years later, in 1814, both Champollion in France and, independently, Thomas Young in Britain, focused their attention on the inscription. In 1815, Champollion contacted Young for help in checking the original. The Englishman cautiously obliged until he was warned by de Sacy that Champollion was not trustworthy.



Henry Briggs. Copy of Thomas Lawrence's 1820s *Portrait of Thomas Young*. 19th century. © The Art Collection/Alamy

For de Sacy was a royalist, while the Champollion brothers had supported Napoleon. Indeed, the older brother was appointed Napoleon's secretary in March 1815 in Grenoble, where Jean-François met Napoleon, who enthusiastically offered to have his Coptic dictionary and grammar published in Paris. On the very day of the battle of Waterloo in June, Jean-François published an editorial in the local government gazette unwisely hailing Napoleon as 'our legitimate prince'.

After Napoleon's defeat, the brothers were exiled from Grenoble to their native Figeac. For nearly 18 months, Champollion made little progress with Egyptian decipherment. Returning to Grenoble in 1817, he took up teaching at a local school; he also married a local woman, Rosine Blanc, and they had a daughter. Although he continued to

study Egypt, he published almost nothing. His health began to trouble him. In 1821, he joined an uprising against the city's royalist authorities, was put on trial for treason, acquitted, but forced to leave Grenoble and faced a radically uncertain future in Paris.

Supported by his ever-loyal brother, Champollion settled to studying the Rosetta Stone and any other Egyptian inscriptions and manuscripts he could obtain. He published his first theory of Egyptian scripts, but quickly realised that it was incorrect after reading some ground-breaking analysis by Young published in 1819 in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. In September 1822 he suddenly perceived the basic principles, informed his brother 'Je tiens l'affaire!' and collapsed with exhaustion for five days, before giving his historic lecture at the Académie des Inscriptions et

Belles-Lettres. Shortly afterwards, he published his celebrated 'Table of phonetic signs' (Greek, demotic and hieroglyphic) in his *Lettre à M. Dacier* (Bon-Joseph Dacier was the Academy's permanent secretary). After further intensive study, his classic *Précis du système hiéroglyphique des anciens Égyptiens* appeared in 1824. Young declared himself highly impressed, but publicly insisted that Champollion should give him more credit for his correct first steps. Champollion vehemently refused and thus a controversy began.

During 1824–26, Champollion spent many months visiting ancient Egyptian collections in Italy, especially in Turin. In Rome, he was invited by the Pope to become a cardinal, in recognition of his decipherment's apparent dating of Egyptian civilisation as quite recent, in conformity with the biblical account – an honour he refused, as a married man. The French king, Charles X, appointed Champollion the first curator of the new Egyptian section at the Louvre Museum. Among his visitors was Young, whom Champollion keenly assisted with his demotic researches, despite their public dispute over the hieroglyphs.

In 1828, with royal support, Champollion sailed for Egypt, joined by the Italian fellow scholar, Ippolito Rosellini, among others. They landed in Alexandria and, after negotiations with Pasha Muhammad Ali, launched their expedition down the Nile to Cairo and Giza. Champollion's most dramatic discoveries were in Upper Egypt. Here he investigated inscriptions on the island of Philae, the sand-blocked temple of Abu Simbel, the temple of Karnak at Luxor and the tombs of the Valley of the Kings (a name chosen by Champollion). He even inscribed his name, 'CHAMPOLÉON', on a pillar at Karnak, as can still be seen today. The pace of his recording and the demands on his failing health were so onerous that at times he fainted from excitement and fatigue. At every site, he was the first person to read its hieroglyphs accurately. He recognised – but kept the fact secret from all but his brother – that pharaonic civilisation was much older than suggested by the Bible, beginning around 3000 BC.

From his return to Paris in early 1830 until his death in 1832, aged 41, Champollion continued his research. It was a difficult period, however, both for France and for him personally. Academic jealousy prevented his election to the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres until 1830. During the revolution of that year, which overthrew Charles X, armed citizens broke into the Louvre and looted some of the Egyptian collections. Although Champollion was appointed a professor at the prestigious Collège de France in 1831, where he gave his first university course, he was too ill to continue lecturing.

In his 1824 *Précis*, Champollion wrote famously: 'Hieroglyphic writing is a complex system, a script all at once figurative, symbolic, and phonetic, in one and the same text, in one and the same sentence, and, I might even venture, in one and the same word.' The complexity of hieroglyphs, the combative personality of Champollion and his premature

death made for decades of trenchant controversy about his decipherment, which was not fully accepted until the 1860s.

The controversy over Thomas Young's role continues still today. In my view, the single most fascinating aspect of the decipherment is that it required both a polymath and a specialist, even if Champollion would never bring himself to admit this in public. Young's myriad-mindedness provided some key initial insights between 1814 and 1819, but then his versatility worked against further progress. Champollion's single-mindedness hindered him from arriving at these insights in the same period, but once he had started, his tunnel vision allowed him to begin to perceive the system behind the signs. Both Young's breadth of interests and Champollion's narrowness of focus were essential for the revolutionary breakthrough that Champollion, alone, announced in 1822–23.

Andrew Robinson's latest publication *Cracking the Egyptian Code: The Revolutionary Life of Jean-François Champollion*, published by Thames & Hudson, is available in paperback (£9.99).

Giuseppe Angelelli, *Champollion's Egyptian expedition members in Thebes*, with Champollion seated in centre wearing a sword. 1834–36. Archaeological Museum, Florence. Photo: Scala Florence, courtesy of the Ministero Beni e Att. Culturali.

