

# COMMENT

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The hieroglyphic script of the ancient Egyptians mystified scholars until the nineteenth century.

## A clash of symbols

**Andrew Robinson** pieces together the story of who deserves the credit for deciphering the hieroglyphs.

In archaeology, as in other sciences, assigning credit for achievements is often controversial. The decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs in the 1820s is an intriguing case. Recognition for this great feat is generally — and properly — given to the French linguist and archaeologist Jean-François Champollion, who is regarded as the founder of Egyptology. But it is widely acknowledged that crucial initial steps were taken by the English polymath Thomas Young.

Having written biographies of both men, I am convinced that the narrowly focused, hot-tempered, impecunious Champollion learnt much from seeds of knowledge planted by the wide-ranging, cool-headed, wealthy Young. Had they chosen to combine forces, rather than to be divided by the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte (a patron of Champollion), the problem could well have been solved years earlier.

In stark contrast to Champollion's specialization in Egypt, Young was a professional

physician. He is best known as a physicist — for his double-slit experiment showing the interference of light waves and for his modulus of elasticity — and as a physiologist, who theorized about how the eye sees colour. He was also a polyglot, who named the Indo-European language family in 1813, after comparing some 400 languages.

Young became hooked on ancient Egyptian scripts in 1814, when he began to decipher the Rosetta Stone. Since its discovery by Napoleon's army in 1799, the tablet's three equivalent inscriptions — two in unreadable Egyptian scripts (hieroglyphic and demotic), the third in the Greek alphabet — had triggered much activity by scholars. Notable among them were the French Orientalist Silvestre de Sacy — Champollion's teacher — and de Sacy's Swedish student Johan Åkerblad.

What ensnared Young was writing a review of a massive German history of languages, the editor of which asserted that the unknown language of the Rosetta Stone and other

Egyptian artefacts might be written in an alphabet of little more than 30 letters. When he was shown some fragments of inscribed papyri from Egypt, Young could not resist the challenge. In the summer of 1814, he took a copy of the Rosetta Stone inscription to the English seaside town of Worthing to study.

### CONJECTURE AND COMBAT

In November of that year, as foreign secretary of Britain's Royal Society, Young saw a letter Champollion had written from Grenoble to the society's president<sup>1</sup>. It mentioned Champollion's access to two differing reproductions of the Rosetta Stone, and asked the society to check passages from them against the original in the British Museum in London.

Young replied to the letter, and the following year Champollion read what Young called his "conjectural translation" of the Rosetta Stone, attempted in Worthing and lent to Champollion by de Sacy. Then, the battle of Waterloo and its bitter aftermath intervened. The ►

► royalist de Sacy turned against the republican Champollion, openly advising Young to regard his former student as a potential plagiarist<sup>1</sup>. The Young–Champollion correspondence ceased.

In late 1821, by his own admission, Champollion read Young's key work on Egypt, published as a supplement to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1819. In 1822, the two men met at the academic meeting in Paris at which Champollion famously announced his decipherment of the hieroglyphs, barely mentioning Young. In 1822–23, they warily exchanged letters. But when Young published a book claiming that Champollion's decipherment was an "extension" of his earlier work, a heated argument ensued.

They remained respectful to each other in public. Young was, after all, held in high esteem by French scientists. In 1828, the two even worked together briefly in Paris; Champollion, by now the first curator of Egyptian antiquities at the Louvre, offered to open up his collections and some personal notes on the demotic script to a grateful Young.

In private, Champollion was scathing. Writing from Egypt's Valley of the Kings in 1829, Champollion exulted to his brother in French<sup>2</sup>: "So the poor Dr Young is incorrigible? Why stir up old matter that is already mummified? ... The Briton can do as he pleases — *it shall be ours*: and all of old England will learn from *young* France to spell hieroglyphs by a totally different method."

French writers have almost unanimously supported the intellectual independence of Champollion from Young, at least after the decipherment was accepted in the mid-nineteenth century and Champollion became a national hero. Outside France, opinion is still divided.

Some British Egyptologists have suggested that Champollion poached from Young the concept of hieroglyphs as a 'mixed', alphabetic-cum-ideographic, system. The Irish clergyman Edward Hincks, an Egyptologist who later helped to decode Mesopotamian cuneiform, claimed in 1846 that Champollion was guided by Young's alphabetic analysis of the hieroglyphic cartouches for the royal names Ptolemy and Berenice.

Others saw Champollion's subsequent interlocking translations of numerous cartouches as key. A former keeper of Egyptian antiquities at the British Museum, Peter le Page Renouf, argued in 1896 that Young's few readings were too unsystematic to have been crucial. His reaction was echoed in 2005 by Richard Parkinson, current curator of the Rosetta Stone, who wrote<sup>3</sup> that "while

Young discovered parts of an alphabet — a key — Champollion unlocked an entire written language".

In my view, the truth lies in between. Champollion was firmly on the wrong track in the first half of 1821. It was Young's 1819



Script decoders: Thomas Young (left) and Jean-François Champollion.

article, especially its tentative hieroglyphic 'alphabet', that reoriented Champollion and set him on the right path. Without it, Champollion might never have made his great breakthrough of 1822.

### CRACKING THE CODE

Documentary evidence for Young's influence on Champollion is lacking, but Champollion's inconsistent publication record from 1810–21 is suggestive. In April 1821 (before he read Young's *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article), he published a short study illustrating 700 Egyptian hieroglyphic and hieratic signs. Hieratic is the cursive script derived from hieroglyphic in the third millennium BC. It then gave birth in around 700 BC to demotic, the second Egyptian script on the Rosetta Stone. Champollion's study, *De l'écriture hiératique des anciens Égyptiens*, consisted of a mere seven pages of text and seven plates of illustrations. Despite its brevity, it was inadvertently revealing.

The study stated three conclusions<sup>2</sup>. First, hieratic "is no more than a simple modification of the hieroglyphic system, and differs from it only in the form of its signs". So hieroglyphic was the origin of hieratic, and hence of demotic. Second, hieratic "is in no way alphabetical". Third, hieratic characters "are signs of things and not sounds" — ideographic, not phonetic.

Champollion's first conclusion was right, but had already been published by Young. In an 1815 letter to de Sacy, Young noted a "striking resemblance" between some hieratic and demotic signs and "the corresponding hieroglyphics" in the Rosetta Stone and in some papyrus manuscripts. Champollion had made the same deduction in 1821 on his own, or so he said.

Champollion's second conclusion was

likely to be wrong because it contradicted the work of de Sacy, Åkerblad and Young, who agreed that demotic almost certainly contained alphabetic elements. In the same letter to de Sacy, Young stated that demotic was neither purely ideographic nor a pure alphabet, but a mixture.

Given that error, Champollion's third conclusion, that hieroglyphic and hieratic represented "things" and not sounds, was bound to be incorrect. His published denial of phoneticism in hieratic was a blunder, as well as an admission of how far behind Young he was.

Champollion soon regretted the 1821 publication. He allegedly made strenuous efforts to withdraw all copies. This tale is probably true, given that copies are extremely rare and Champollion presented only the illustrations to Young, who was unaware of the

text until later. Most tellingly, Champollion made no reference to it in his 1822 paper announcing the decipherment. The suppression makes sense because Champollion had decided — after reading Young — that there was a phonetic element in the Egyptian scripts after all.

So the decipherment of the Egyptian hieroglyphs required both a polymath and a specialist to crack the code, even if Champollion would never admit it in public. Young's myriad-mindedness provided some key initial insights in 1814–19, but then his versatility slowed his progress.

Champollion's single-mindedness hindered him from arriving at these insights in the same period, but once he got started, his 'tunnel vision' allowed him to perceive the system behind the signs in 1822. Both Young's breadth of interests and Champollion's narrow focus were essential.

Had they collaborated, a 'Champollion–Young decipherment' of the Egyptian hieroglyphs might well have begun in 1815 — and gained acceptance decades before Champollion's hotly contested version triumphed in the 1860s, long after its discoverer's death. ■

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3. Parkinson, R. *The Rosetta Stone* (British Museum Press, 2005).