THE MEANING OF EGYPTIAN HIEROGLYPHICS

BY ANDREW ROBINSON

The ancient Egyptians’ pictograms had archaeologists baffled, until some pioneering early 19th Century linguists deciphered them.

HE DISCOVERY OF Tutankhamun’s tomb wouldn’t happen for another century but in 1821 in Piccadilly, London, an exhibition about ancient Egypt opened. Encouraged by Napoleon’s dramatic invasion of Egypt two decades earlier, ‘Egyptomania’ was catching on in Britain as it had in Paris. The venue, the Egyptian Hall, was decorated with Egyptian motifs, two statues of Isis and Osiris, and hieroglyphs.

On display to the public was a magnificently carved and painted one-sixth scale model of an ancient Egyptian tomb, which had been discovered four years earlier in the area of ancient Thebes (modern Luxor), later to be known as the Valley of the Kings. At the inauguration ceremony, the tomb’s Italian discoverer, Giovanni Belzoni – a former circus strongman turned flamboyant excavator of Egypt – appeared wrapped in mummy bandages before a huge crowd. However, he was obliged to admit that he did not know who was buried in the tomb, or when, because no-one could read hieroglyphs.

Ancient Egypt was as celebrated in ancient Athens and Rome as it was in 19th Century Paris and London. In fact, it has exerted a powerful influence on the world of learning for well over two millennia, beginning with the Greek historian Herodotus, who travelled in Egypt around 450 BC. In his Histories, Herodotus identified the pyramids at Giza as places of royal burial, and provided important information about the process of mummification. Yet his works were of little or no help to 19th-Century scholars in understanding ancient Egyptian writing, for in classical antiquity, hieroglyphic writing fell into disuse. No Greek or Latin writer could read hieroglyphs, either.

The reason was that the ancient civilisation described in the hieroglyphs, founded before 3000 BC, went into eclipse in the second half of the first millennium BC; when Egypt was conquered – first by Persians, and then by Macedonian Greeks under Alexander the Great in 332 BC. For three centuries Egypt was ruled by the Greek-speaking Ptolemaic dynasty, named after Alexander’s general, Ptolemy I – one of whom created the Rosetta Stone in 196 BC.

This ended with the death of Cleopatra VII and the Roman occupation in 30 BC, which lasted until AD 395. Thereafter, Egypt was ruled first by Coptic Christians, then by Muslims, until the time of Napoleon. Spoken Coptic was descended from the language of ancient Egypt, but written Coptic was not hieroglyphic; it was entirely alphabetic, like Greek and Latin. Nevertheless, the Coptic language would prove invaluable in reading the hieroglyphs by providing approximate pronunciations for ancient Egyptian words.

Sacred Writings

Greek and Roman authors generally credited Egypt with the invention of writing, as a gift from the gods. They thought that hieroglyphs – the word means ‘sacred writings’ –
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were impenetrable symbols of ancient Egyptian wisdom, which had nothing to do with alphabets. They dismissed any phonetic component in the hieroglyphs, and claimed that they were conceptual or symbolic signs. Thus, a hieroglyphic pictogram of a hawk was said to represent the key to further progress was a copy of a bilingual obelisk inscription from Philae. The key to confirming the phonetic values of the hieroglyphs probably came from a spell over a hawk was said to represent the signs. Thus, a hieroglyphic pictogram they were conceptual or symbolic in the hieroglyphs, and claimed that dismiss any phonetic component had nothing to do with alphabets. They young's sign-for-sign comparison of the young's article on ancient Egypt in King Ptolemy on the Rosetta Stone was a legal decree issued at Memphis, as 'demotic', a cursive form of ancient Egyptian writing, as opposed to the separate signs of hieroglyphic. The first step was to translate the Greek inscription. This turned out not to be a legal decree issued at Memphis, the principal city of ancient Egypt, by a council of priests assembled on the anniversary of the coronation of Ptolemy V Epiphanes, on 27 March 196 BC. The Greek names Ptolemy, Alexander and Alexandra, among others, occurred in the inscription. The eye of would-be decipherers was caught by the very last sentence of the Greek. It read: “This decree shall be inscribed on a stela of hard stone in sacred and native [i.e. hieroglyphic and demotic] and Greek characters and set up in each of the first, second and third [rank] temples beside the image of the ever-living king.” In other words, the three inscriptions – hieroglyphic, demotic and Greek – were definitely equivalent in meaning, though not necessarily “word for word” translations of each other. Since the hieroglyphic section was broken, it was at first ignored in favour of the demotic section, which was almost complete. In 1802, two scholars, a French Orientalist called Silvestre de Sacy and his Swedish student Johan Akerblad, both adopted similar techniques. They searched for

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THE TRIGGER FOR Jean-François Champollion’s discovery of phoneticism in the hieroglyphs probably came from Thomas Young’s article on ancient Egypt in the Encyclopédia Britannica. This included Young’s “alphabet” between the two names on the Rosetta Stone’s hieroglyphic cartouche (A) thought to be the name of the Egyptian king Ptolemy with non-corresponding names written in the Greek alphabet as b, l, t, c, o, p. The key to further progress was a copy of a bilingual obelisk inscription from Philae sent to Paris in early 1822. The base block inscription was in Greek, the column inscription in hieroglyphic. In the Greek, the names of Ptolemy and Daespoto were mentioned, in the hieroglyphs, only two cartouches occurred – presumably representing the same names. One of the cartouches was almost identical to one form of the cartouche of Ptolemy on the Rosetta Stone (B). There was also a shorter version of the Ptolemy cartouche on the Rosetta Stone (C). Champollion decided that the shorter cartouche spelt only Ptolemy, while the longer (Rosetta) cartouche must have an additional royal title. Following Young, he then proceeded to guess the phonetic values of the hieroglyphs in the second, unknown cartouche on the Philae obelisk (D). There were four signs in common, these with the values l, t, o, p, but the phonetic value t was represented differently. Champollion deduced correctly that the two S Ptolemy cartouches might differ, that different signs with the same phonetic value (compare in English, Gill and JR, recognize and recognise). He now had the basis for an essentially correct hieroglyphic ‘alphabet’.

A) Rosetta Stone
B) Philae obelisk
C) Shorter version on the Rosetta Stone
D) The phonetic values

THE BOTTOM LINE

The scholars who, step-by-step over several decades, rediscovered a lost language.

Silvestre de Sacy (1760-1838) was a French mathematician famous for his analysis of heat. He accompanied Napoleon Bonaparte on his invasion of Egypt and returned with a collection of artefacts that inspired the young Champollion to investigate Egyptian scripts.

Joseph Fourier (1768-1830) was a French mathematician who published a technique for the solution of partial differential equations.

Johan Akerblad (1793-1818) was a Swedish diplomat and student of de Sacy. He compared the Egyptian demotic and the Greek inscriptions on the Rosetta Stone, and concluded that demotic appeared to be an alphabet like Greek. Although this was not so, he correctly identified certain names and words in demotic as alphabetic.

Thomas Young (1773-1829) was an English polymath who practiced as a physician and is known for his interpretations of Egyptian hieroglyphs.

Jean-François Champollion (1790-1832) studied Egyptian scripts from the age of 12. His breakthrough discovery was a technique of transforming hieroglyphic and demotic signs into a phonetic and alphabetic alphabet that proved partially correct.

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a name, in particular Ptolemy, by isolating repeated groups of demotic symbols. They noticed that the names in demotic seemed to be written alphabetically, as in the Greek inscription – that is, the demotic spelling of a name apparently contained more or less the same number of signs as the number of alphabetic letters in its assumed Greek equivalent. Matching demotic signs with Greek letters, they drew up a tentative alphabet of demotic signs. By then applying this tentative alphabet to the rest of the inscription, certain other demotic words, such as ‘Greece’, ‘Egypt’ and ‘temple’, could be identified. It looked as though the entire demotic script, not just the names, might be alphabetic like the Greek inscription. But in fact demotic was not an alphabet, nor was it wholly unrelated to hieroglyphic, as de Sacy and Akerblad thought. But de Sacy deserves credit for a useful suggestion in 1811 that the Greek names inside hieroglyphic cartouches, which he assumed must be those of rulers like Ptolemy and Alexander, on the other hand, might be written in an alphabet, as they almost certainly were in the demotic inscription. The same technique, he knew, was used to write foreign names in the Chinese script, which was also thought (wrongly) to have no intrinsic phonetic component.

**The Rosetta Stone**

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When Tukanev’s cartouche was discovered in 1922 and deciphered thanks to Champollion’s work, it turned out that the ‘click’ pictogram was a phonetic sign for the vowel ‘u’, the ‘three-handled cross’ stood for the word ‘ankh’ (or ‘life’) and the ‘shepherd’s crook’ was a symbol meaning ‘ruler’. Thanks to our understanding of hieroglyphs, the secrets of a great civilisation could now begin to be uncovered.

**Jean-François Champollion**

Champollion, at a schoolboy, had been inspired by French physician and mathematician Joseph Fourier.

Fourier became prefect of Grenoble on his return from Egypt and showed the teenager his collection of antiquities, including inscriptions, around 1805. Champollion became absorbed in the problem of the hieroglyphs. Later, in Paris, he was taught by de Sacy, whose frustration with the problem and Young’s subsequent progress turned Champollion’s quest into an obsession with beating his English rival. The essential clue came in 1822, from a newly discovered cartouche containing the name of Cleopatra. Champollion now had a hieroglyphic “alphabet”, mostly correct, that allowed him to translate the names of dozens of rulers including Alexander and Ramesses. Over the next year or so, Champollion analysed the dawning combination of phonetic and non-phonetic signs in the hieroglyphic script. In 1824, he wrote: “Hieroglyphic writing is a complex system, a script at once figurative, symbolic and phonetic in one and the same text... and, I might add, in one and the same word.”

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