On 1 May 1821, an alluring exhibition opened in London’s Piccadilly at the exotic Egyptian Hall, built in 1812 and inspired by the Egyptomania created by French archaeological discoveries in Egypt under Napoleon Bonaparte. A reviewer in *The Times* called it a ‘singular combination and skilful arrangement of objects so new and in themselves so striking’. It ran for a year.

On display was the interior of an Egyptian tomb in Thebes (modern Luxor), discovered in 1817, from what would soon come to be called (by Jean-François Champollion) the Valley of the Kings. Actually, it was a one-sixth scale model, over 15 metres (50 feet) in length, complemented by a full-sized reproduction of two of the tomb’s most impressive chambers.

The bas-reliefs and polychrome wall decoration, showing gods, goddesses, animals, the life of the pharaoh and manifold coloured hieroglyphs, had been re-created from wax moulds taken of the original reliefs, and from paintings made on the spot by the tomb’s Italian discoverer, Giovanni Belzoni, and his compatriot, Alessandro Ricci, a physician-turned-artist who would go on to work extensively with Champollion in Egypt from 1828 to 1829.

But perhaps the most startling object from the tomb arrived late from Egypt, and was temporarily deposited in the British Museum. This was a creamy-white calcite (Egyptian alabaster) sarcophagus carved outside and inside with hieroglyphs originally inlaid with ‘Egyptian blue’, that is, calcium copper tetrasilicate. Unlike the rest of Belzoni’s exhibition, it can still be seen as a key attraction in St John Soane’s Museum, not far from the British Museum, following its purchase by Soane in 1824.

For which pharaoh was this tomb, and its sarcophagus, intended? In 1821, no one – not even Champollion – knew the answer, because no one could confidently read the hieroglyphic script, despite the tantalising Greek alphabetic clues in the Rosetta Stone, which had arrived in London in 1799 and had been on display at the British Museum since 1802. According to Belzoni, the tomb was ‘Presumed to be the Tomb of Psammis’. This name came, very tentatively, from Dr Thomas Young (1773–1829), foreign secretary of the Royal Society; a professional physician, a great physicist and a brilliant polymath who had been studying ancient Egyptian writing since 1814. Young had examined Belzoni’s and Ricci’s paintings and observed a similarity between a prominent hieroglyphic cartouche – that is, a small group of hieroglyphs inscribed within an oval ring – in the tomb, and similar cartouches carved on obelisks in Rome and Egypt. The latter cartouches Young had already
identified with Psammis, Psammi–, or even Psammite, the name of an Egyptian ruler mentioned in the writings of Herodotus, Manetho and Pliny: three celebrated ancient historians of Egypt, who were Greek, Egyptian and Roman, respectively. Yet when the exhibition moved to Paris in the second half of 1822, there was no mention of Psammitis in the French catalogue. Its author, Champollion – though writing under a precautionary pseudonym – did not accept Young’s attribution. At this very moment, in his famous Young’s dictionary, and tried to match them with undeciphered demotic Egyptian inscriptions, and who was at that time researching his prestigious ‘historical preface’ to the first volume of the government’s Description de l’Egypte with the help of the Champollion brothers.

In 1807–9, supported by Fourier and by his brother, Champollon studied in Paris at the School of Oriental Languages, again under spartan conditions. Working excitedly on a collection of Coptic manuscripts that had been ‘borrowed’ by Napoleon from the Vatican Library, he convinced himself that Coptic might be similar to the language of the demotic section beneath the hieroglyphic of the Rosetta Stone. Demotic was the script used in the later centuries of Ancient Egyptian civilisation, before the Greek alphabet’s arrival in the Graeco-Roman period. In 1808, using a copy of the Rosetta Stone, he translated Greek alphabetic words into Coptic words using Coptic dictionaries, and tried to match them with undeciphered demotic

4. The Franco–Tuscan Expedition to Egypt at Thebes, painted 1834–4 by Giuseppe Angelelli (1803–44), a member of the expedition. Champollion is shown seated (just to the right of centre) with a sword and wearing Eastern garb and a red cap. Archaeological Museum, Florence. © Scala, Florence, courtesy of the Ministero Beni e Att Culturali.

5. The tentative hieroglyphic ‘alphabet’ published by Thomas Young in his article on Egypt, published in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1819.

6. and 7. Sketches by Champollion of the Sphinx at Giza and of Ramesses IV’s tomb in the Valley of the Kings, the abode of the Franco–Tuscan expedition in 1829. © Tony Reddick/Alamy.


6. and 7. Sketches by Champollion of the Sphinx at Giza and of Ramesses IV’s tomb in the Valley of the Kings, the abode of the Franco–Tuscan expedition in 1829. © Tony Reddick/Alamy.


6. and 7. Sketches by Champollion of the Sphinx at Giza and of Ramesses IV’s tomb in the Valley of the Kings, the abode of the Franco–Tuscan expedition in 1829. © Tony Reddick/Alamy.


6. and 7. Sketches by Champollion of the Sphinx at Giza and of Ramesses IV’s tomb in the Valley of the Kings, the abode of the Franco–Tuscan expedition in 1829. © Tony Reddick/Alamy.

In 1815, Young had hardly begun his work and probably a 'plagiarist of his British colleague’s most influential professor, Sylvestre. In Paris, Champollion's brothers lost their positions in Napoleon's fall from power a few months later, the Champollion brothers lost their positions in Grenoble and were exiled to Figeac. With the help of the Greek
Young was able, and in 1819, published a pioneering article on Egypt in Encyclopaedia Britannica. This included his observation, based on the Rosetta Stone and other inscriptions, of a ‘striking resemblance’ between demotic signs and their corresponding hieroglyphs. Young concluded that the demotic script consisted of ‘imitations of the hieroglyphics… mixed with letters of the alphabet’. In other words, the demotic script included both symbolic (logographic) and phonetic elements.

But Young was unsure whether this was also true of the hieroglyphic script, which in 1819 was considered to be purely symbolic, apart from some phonetic spellings of Graeco-Roman names in cartouches. Two of these, Prolemy and Berenice, Young analysed into a chart of 13 phonetic symbols, which he cautiously labelled ‘SOUND5’, six of which are today considered correct, three partly correct and four incorrect. In addition, Young was able, with the help of the Greek portion of the Rosetta Stone, to compile a vocabulary of names and other words in demotic with their hieroglyphic equivalents, spell with a mixture of phonetic and symbolic signs, of which some 80 words, almost half, are correct.

During this period, Champollion made little progress. On return to Grenoble from exile in Figeac, he became a schoolteacher and even considered becoming a notary – not least to satisfy the expectations of his potential father-in-law, a Grenoble glove-maker. He finally married Rosine Blanc in 1818 and had a daughter six years later.

His only notable publication on ancient Egypt in 1817–1821 turned out to contain a blunder, a claim that none of the hieroglyphic or demotic signs had phonetic values. A few months later he withdrew the publication and never referred to it again.

By late 1821, he had been forced to leave Grenoble when he was prosecuted by the city’s royalist authorities for supposedly taking part in a rebellion, at the very time of the Egyptian Hall exhibition in London. Though acquitted of the charge, in deep despair and declining health he settled with his brother in Paris. But the unwanted move turned out to lead to his breakthrough – possibly, though not provably, provoked by Champollion’s reading in Paris of Mannetho’s Egyptian history, published in 1824. In it, he stated: ‘Hieroglyphic writing is a complex system, a script all at once figurative, symbolic, and phonetic, in one and the same text, once figurative, symbolic, and phonetic, in one and the same text,…’

Further analysis led to his most important publication in 1824, Études égyptiennes, which included Champollion’s brilliant insight enabled the cartouche of another unknown pharaoh to be immediately read by its discoverer, Howard Carter – as ‘Tutankhamun’.


10. The Rosetta Stone, inscribed in 196 BC: at the top is the hieroglyphic script; in the middle is the demotic; at the bottom, the Greek alphabet. First studied by Champollion in 1808, it proved crucial to Thomas Young’s early steps in decipherment in 1814–15. © The Trustees of the British Museum.


Egyptology