

Deciphering the riddle

The Rosetta Stone became the Egyptian/Greek bilingual key to deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphs through the largely independent labours of an English scholar and a French scholar. Following analysis of the inscription in 1814–19 by the polymath Thomas Young – physician, physicist and philologist – a breakthrough occurred in 1822–3 in the mind of the polyglot archaeologist Jean-François Champollion, who thereby became the founder of Egyptology.

Since then, numerous Rosetta-related academic and popular studies have appeared, including biographies of both Champollion and Young, who differed radically in intellectual outlook and personality. *The Riddle of the Rosetta* offers further commentary, based on almost a decade of research by historian of science Jed Buchwald and writer Diane Josefowicz, authors of *The Zodiac of Paris* (2010), which discussed Champollion's contribution to solving another ancient Egyptian mystery concerning astronomy. Combining exhaustive excavation of British and French archives with eclectic biographical elements, their valuable new book explains in unique detail, so far as the surviving evidence allows, the twists and turns behind the perpetually fascinating decipherment – including how much of the credit should go to Young, to



Henry Briggs,
Thomas Young
(after Sir Thomas
Lawrence), 1820s.
Royal Society.

whom the 'intemperate' Champollion undoubtedly showed 'lack of generosity', according to the authors and almost all previous writers.

Perhaps the most intriguing period is 1821–3. In April 1821, Champollion stated in a misguided publication (later withdrawn by him) that the ancient Egyptian scripts represented things or ideas, not sounds. Thus, no Egyptian 'alphabet' existed. He repeated this belief on the first page of his most famous publication, *Lettre à M. Dacier* (1822). Yet now he made one crucial exception, undoubtedly influenced by Young's 1819 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article: hieroglyphs could represent sounds, not ideas, when used to write non-Egyptian proper names, such as Alexander, Cleopatra and Ptolemy, in cartouches.

In September 1822, Champollion experienced a legendary eureka moment, apparently when he read the name phonetically of a historically known, native Egyptian pharaoh, Rameses, in a cartouche – an idea hinted at by Young in 1819. In April 1823, Champollion announced in Paris that there was, after all, a major phonetic component in the hieroglyphic script. It had existed not only in the Greco-Roman period but also throughout Egyptian history.

No doubt Champollion's passion, indeed reverence, for ancient Egyptian civilisation helped him succeed. It lured him as a schoolchild, unlike Young, who never visited Egypt. The polymath had too many other interests. This striking contrast could have been more strongly etched by the authors, who mention 'polymathy' just once in the entire book (despite its subtitle). In my view, as a biographer of both Young and Champollion, the decipherment's single most intriguing aspect is that it required both a polymath and a specialist. Young's myriad-mindedness provided some vital clues in 1814–19, but then his versatility obstructed him. Champollion's single-mindedness hindered him from spotting these clues – but once he got 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 announcement by Champollion, alone, in 1822–3.

Andrew Robinson

Author of *The Last Man Who Knew Everything* and *Cracking the Egyptian Code*



Champollion in Bedouin dress, during his expedition to Egypt in 1828–9, probably painted by expedition member Giuseppe Angelelli. Collection Chateauminois.

The Riddle of the Rosetta: How an English Polymath and a French Polyglot Discovered the Meaning of Egyptian Hieroglyphs by Jed Z. Buchwald and Diane Greco Josefowicz, Princeton University Press, £34.