

PROLOGUE: EGYPTOMANIA

In 1821 a pioneering exhibition about ancient Egypt opened in Piccadilly, in the heart of fashionable London. Egyptomania, encouraged by Napoleon Bonaparte's dramatic invasion of Egypt two decades earlier, was catching on in Britain as it had in Paris. The exhibition's venue, known as the Egyptian Hall, was a private museum of natural history. It had been built on Piccadilly in 1812, in an exotic 'Egyptian style', and featured an exterior decorated with Egyptian motifs, two statues of Isis and Osiris, and mysterious hieroglyphs. On display to the public, for the first time in Europe, was a magnificently carved and painted ancient Egyptian tomb, which had been discovered and opened three years earlier in the area of ancient Thebes (modern Luxor) that would later be known as the Valley of the Kings. At the inauguration ceremony, held on 1 May 1821, the tomb's Italian discoverer, Giovanni Belzoni – a former circus strongman turned flamboyant excavator of Egypt, who was about to become one of the most famous figures in London – appeared wrapped in mummy bandages before a huge crowd. Some 2,000 visitors paid half a crown to see the tomb on the opening day; a reviewer in *The Times* newspaper called the exhibition a 'singular combination and skilful arrangement of objects so new and in themselves so striking'.



Egyptian Hall, in Piccadilly, London, as seen in the 1820s. An early example of British Egyptomania, its facade was decorated with supposedly Egyptian statues and hieroglyphs.

Of course, what was on view was not the tomb itself, but rather a one-sixth scale model, which measured 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 Belzoni and his compatriot Alessandro Ricci, a physician turned artist. However, some of the objects on display were originals, such as two mummies and a piece of rope used by the last party of ancient Egyptians to enter the tomb. The *pièce de résistance* – indeed, one of the finest Egyptian works of art ever discovered – was an empty, lidless, white alabaster sarcophagus, almost 3 metres (10 feet) in length, which arrived by boat from Egypt in August, well after the exhibition's inauguration. Translucent when a lamp was placed inside it, with a full-length portrait of a goddess on the bottom, where the royal mummy would once have lain, the sarcophagus had sides carved, inside and out, with hieroglyphs, exquisitely inlaid with a greenish-blue compound made from copper sulphate.

When the exhibition closed, Belzoni deposited the sarcophagus in the British Museum. After the museum's trustees prevaricated about purchase and eventually refused the object in 1824, Belzoni's widow (whose husband had died suddenly in Africa the previous year) sold it for £2,000 to the architect Sir John Soane, who added it to the celebrated and curious art collection he kept in his private house not far from the British Museum. There, almost two centuries later, one can still see the sarcophagus as the centrepiece of the unique 'Egyptian crypt' in the labyrinthine basement of what is now Sir John Soane's Museum.

To honour and publicize his new acquisition, Soane arranged three separate evening receptions in 1825, specially illuminated by a manufacturer of stained glass and lighting appliances. A visiting artist, Benjamin Robert Haydon, described one of these social occasions in a vivid letter to a female friend that captures the London public's growing fascination with ancient Egypt:

The first person I met ... was Coleridge ... [then] I was pushed up against Turner, the landscape painter with his red face and white waistcoat, and ... was carried off my legs, and irretrievably hustled to where the sarcophagus lay ... It was the finest fun imaginable to see the people come into the Library after wandering about below, amidst tombs and capitals, and shafts, and noseless heads, with a sort of expression of delighted relief at finding themselves among the living, and with coffee and cake. Fancy delicate ladies of fashion dipping their pretty heads into an old mouldy, fusty hieroglyphicked coffin, blessing their stars at its age, wondering whom it contained ... Just as I was

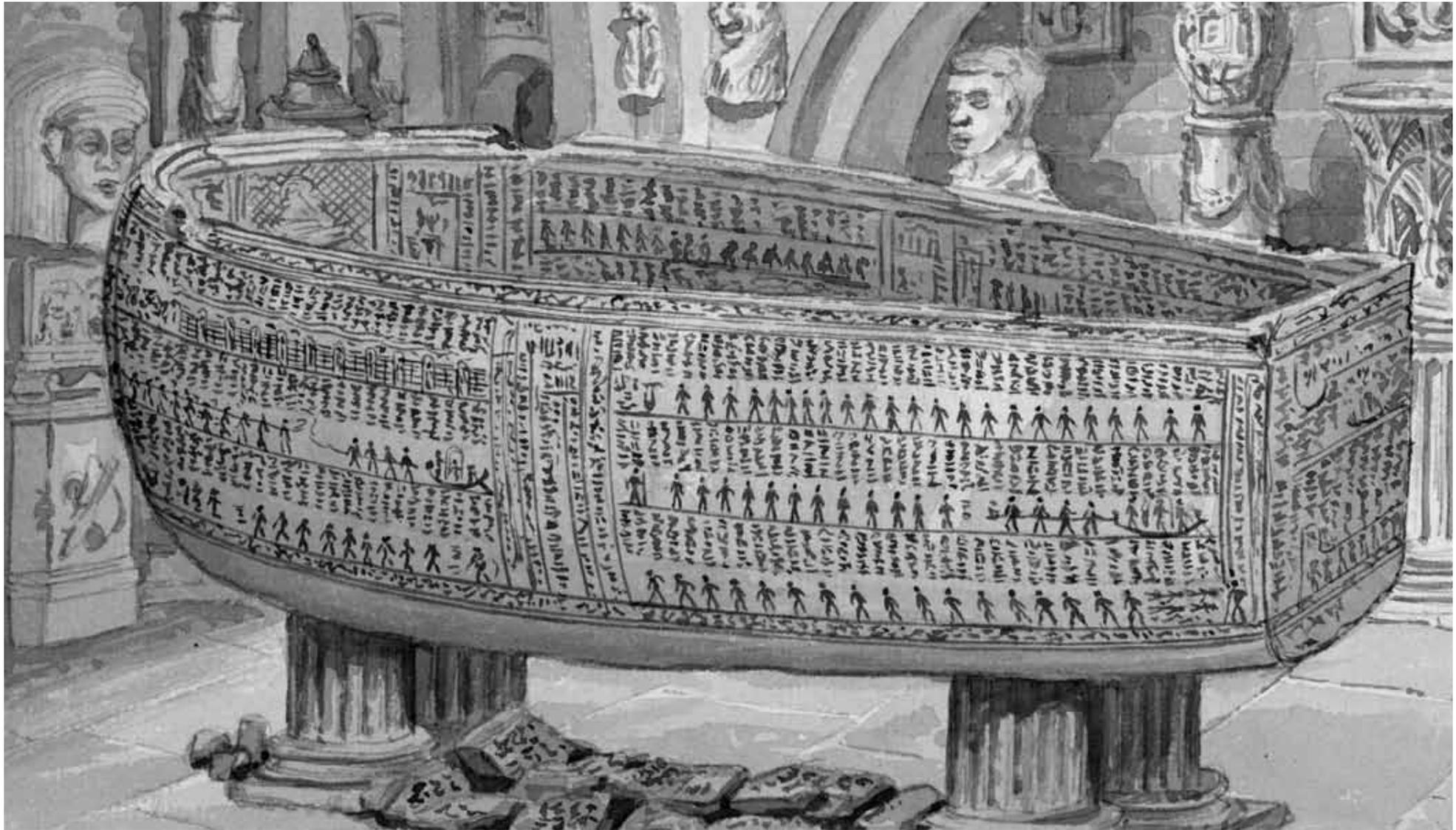
beginning to meditate, the Duke of Sussex, with a star on his breast, and asthma inside it, came squeezing and wheezing along the narrow passage, driving all the women before him like a Blue-Beard, and putting his royal head into the coffin, added his wonder to the wonder of the rest.

Whose tomb was it that Belzoni had opened in 1818, and how old was the sarcophagus of its erstwhile occupant? No one had more than the vaguest idea, because no one could read the hieroglyphs. Accurate knowledge of hieroglyphic script had vanished since its last usage by Egyptian priests in the 4th century AD, a millennium and a half before Napoleon's invasion.

To begin with, Belzoni described it as the tomb of the sacred bull Apis, because he had discovered in one chamber the embalmed carcass of a bull. But by the time of his 1821 exhibition he had changed his mind: he advertised it as 'Presumed to be The Tomb of Psammis', a hypothetical pharaoh.

This name, Psammis, had come from Dr Thomas Young, a professional physician, a leading physicist and mathematician (who served as foreign secretary of the Royal Society), and a gifted linguist. In the period 1814–19, Young had taken the first correct steps towards deciphering the Egyptian hieroglyphs, guided by the Rosetta Stone discovered by Napoleon's army in 1799. Young studied Belzoni's and Ricci's paintings, and observed a similarity between a prominent hieroglyphic cartouche – i.e. a small group of hieroglyphs inscribed within an oval ring – in the tomb, and similar cartouches carved on obelisks in Rome and Egypt. These he had already identified, very tentatively, with 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. They gave the ruler's name as Psammis, or Psammuthis, or perhaps even Psammetichus. 'It is the first time that hieroglyphics have been explained with such accuracy,' enthused Belzoni in his great book of Egyptian travels published in 1820, ignoring Young's own diffident uncertainty. It 'proves the doctor's system beyond doubt to be the right key for reading the unknown language; and it is to be hoped, that he will succeed in completing his arduous and difficult undertaking, as it would give to the world the history of one of the most primitive nations, of which we are now totally ignorant.'

A century later Howard Carter, the English archaeologist who discovered the tomb of the 18th-dynasty pharaoh Tutankhamun in 1922, paid tribute to Belzoni as the first serious excavator of ancient Egypt, whose memoirs had inspired Carter's own determined search for a lost tomb in the Valley of the Kings. Belzoni's *Narrative of the Operations and Recent Discoveries within the Pyramids, Temples, Tombs and Excavations in Egypt and Nubia* was 'one of



Alabaster sarcophagus of the pharaoh Seti I, discovered in the Valley of the Kings by Giovanni Belzoni, and now in the basement of Sir John Soane's Museum, London.

the most fascinating books in the whole of Egyptian literature', Carter wrote in *The Tomb of Tut.Ankh.Amen*. By 1922, of course, Egyptologists could to a large extent read the hieroglyphs of the newly discovered tomb confidently. Carter and his co-workers were able to identify the name of the virtually unknown young pharaoh immediately and with certainty.

As for Belzoni's sarcophagus, during the course of the 19th century it turned out to have nothing to do with Young's supposed pharaoh 'Psammis' (although Young had correctly identified the pharaoh's cartouche). It was in fact made for the ruler Sethos, now generally known as Seti I, a militarily successful and artistically important pharaoh of the 19th dynasty. Seti I had succeeded his father, Ramesses I, in 1291 BC, and on his death in 1278 BC was in turn succeeded by his son Ramesses II, 'the Great' – Egypt's most

famous pharaoh. The goddess portrayed on the bottom of the sarcophagus is now known to be Nut, a deity whose body symbolized the vault of the sky, into whose keeping the corpse of Seti had been committed. The hieroglyphic inscriptions on the sides record, in addition to Seti's royal titles, passages from the so-called Book of the Gates, a magical guide to the journey of a dead man's soul through the Underworld. They describe the route taken by Osiris's solar barque as it navigates an infernal river populated by demons in order to cross the twelve regions of night; magic formulas allow the boat to pass through twelve gates guarded by genies and serpents. Excavations in the floor of the original tomb conducted in 2008–10 revealed a hieroglyphically inscribed fragment of the sarcophagus's missing lid. It was found in a stairwell descending into the base rock, leading to what was presumably intended to be the secret burial chamber of Seti I; the construction was never completed, however, probably on account of the pharaoh's premature death.

We owe this reliable modern knowledge in the first instance to a pennurious, brilliant and arrogant young Frenchman, inspired by Napoleon and obsessed with Egypt: Jean-François Champollion, the founder of Egyptology. Champollion's polymathic English rival, Thomas Young, had started the decipherment of hieroglyphs in 1814–19 but had failed to develop it. In mid-September 1822, in Paris, Champollion made a breakthrough and read the 'lost' hieroglyphic spellings of many Egyptian rulers, including Alexander, Berenice, Cleopatra, Ptolemy and Ramesses, for the first time since the late Roman Empire. Shortly afterwards he wrote a sort of catalogue, at the request of Belzoni, for the Paris exhibition of his Egyptian tomb, though under a precautionary pseudonym. As yet, Champollion could not translate the name of the tomb's pharaoh. Six years later, however, after intensive study of Egyptian monuments and papyri brought to Europe, he was able to sail to Egypt and become the first person since antiquity to give true voice to the inscriptions in the Valley of the Kings. Less than four years later, in 1832, he was dead, at the age of just 41. What follows is the life story of this genius, who revolutionized the world's understanding of ancient Egyptian civilization over more than three millennia by cracking the hieroglyphic code.