

Deciphering the decipherers

YOUNG VERSUS CHAMPOLLION

The rivalry between Young and Champollion in the race to translate Egyptian hieroglyphs is legendary. But what motivated these two scholars, and what qualities did they bring to the endeavour? **Andrew Robinson** goes in search of the personalities behind an extraordinary intellectual achievement.



The disparate personalities of the two scholars are reflected in these contrasting, posthumously created portraits. Champollion is shown 'in Egyptian Costume' (LEFT) on his expedition to Egypt in a painting by expedition member Giuseppe Angelelli. The engraving of a medallion in Westminster Abbey by sculptor Sir Francis Chantrey (ABOVE) depicts Young – who never visited Egypt – in a more modest manner.

IMAGES: Giuseppe Angelelli, private collection – public domain; Sir Francis Chantrey, engraving in George Peacock's biography of Young – public domain

In September 1822, in Paris, Egyptologist Jean-François Champollion made his initial announcement of the decipherment of the Egyptian hieroglyphs. In the audience was physician, physicist, and linguist Thomas Young, visiting Paris from London, who had published a partial decipherment of the hieroglyphs in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* three years prior to Champollion, in 1819. It was the first personal meeting between the two scholars, having only corresponded since their relationship began in 1814.

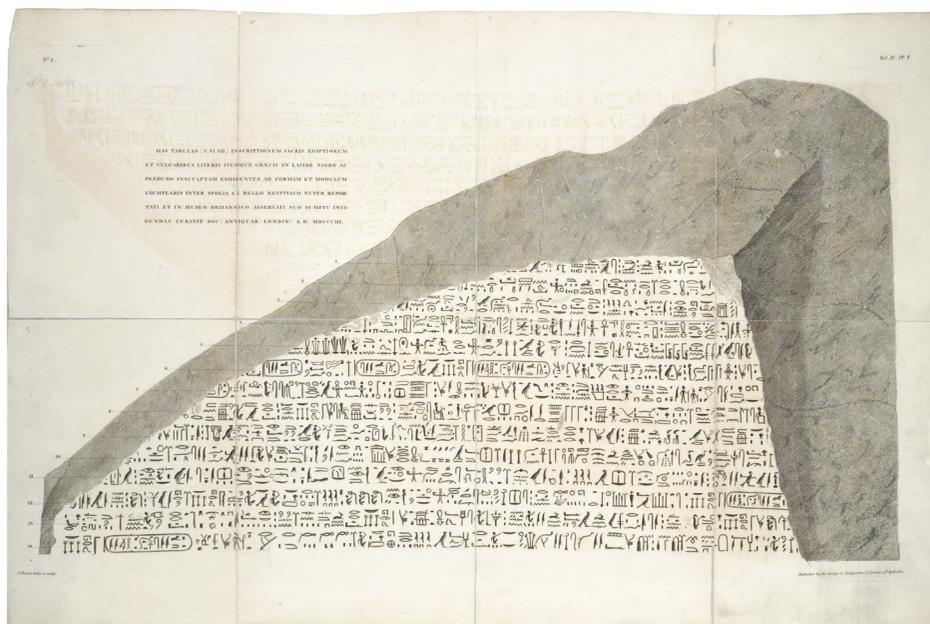
A short while after Champollion's announcement, Young wrote a lengthy letter about the meeting to British antiquarian William Richard Hamilton, who had been responsible for bringing the Rosetta Stone – discovered by the French army in Egypt in 1799 – to the British Museum in 1802. Young began as follows:

I have found here, or rather recovered, Mr. Champollion, junior, who has been living for these ten years on the Inscription of Rosetta, and who has lately been making some steps in Egyptian literature, which really appear to be gigantic. It may be said that he found the key in England which has opened the gate for him, and it is often observed that c'est le premier pas qui coûte [it is the first step which costs]; but if he did borrow an English key, the lock was so dreadfully rusty, that no common arm would have had strength enough to turn it...

After much further comment on Champollion's discoveries, Young concluded: 'I have promised [Champollion] every assistance in his researches that I can procure him in England, and I hope in return to obtain from him an early communication of all his future observations.'

Staking claims

However, when Champollion published the decipherment in an academic article in October 1822 – his celebrated *Lettre à M. Dacier relative à l'alphabet des hiéroglyphes phonétiques* – he offended Young by conspicuously downplaying his work. Young responded by publishing a book in April 1823, *An Account of Some Recent*



Discoveries in Hieroglyphical Literature and Egyptian Antiquities, with the provocative subtitle, Including the Author's Original Alphabet, As Extended by Mr Champollion.

Champollion was duly provoked and informed Young angrily, 'I shall never consent to recognise any other original alphabet than my own, where it is a matter of the hieroglyphic alphabet properly called.' Scholarly war had been declared. During the rest of the 1820s, the two men sometimes cooperated with each other – in particular in 1828, when Champollion helped Young with his decipherment of demotic, the second Egyptian script on the Rosetta Stone – but mostly they competed as rivals.

Their relationship could never have been a harmonious one. Young claimed that Champollion had built his system of reading hieroglyphs on Young's own discoveries and his hieroglyphic 'alphabet', published in 1815-19. While paying generous and frequent tribute to Champollion's unrivalled progress since then, Young wanted his early steps recognised. This Champollion was adamantly unwilling to concede, and in his vehemence he determined to give all of Young's work the minimum possible public recognition. Not long before Young's death in 1829, Champollion, while travelling on his pioneering expedition to ancient Egypt, received word from his elder brother Jacques-Joseph, back in France, that Young was once again causing controversy in Paris with his claim to have launched the decipherment in

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So poor Dr Young is incorrigible? Why flog a mummified horse? ... The Brit can do whatever he wants – it will remain ours: and all of old England will learn from young France how to spell hieroglyphs using an entirely different method [...] May the doctor [i.e. Young] continue to agitate about the alphabet while I, having been for six months among the monuments of Egypt, I am startled by what I am reading fluently rather than what my imagination is able to come up with.

Champollion's nationalistic overtones – at times evident in Young's writings, too – have to some extent bedevilled honest discussion of Champollion and Young ever since those Napoleonic days of intense Franco-British political rivalry. Thus, a French book for the general reader by a writer of Egyptian origin, Robert Solé, collaborating with Egyptologist Dominique Valbelle, translated into English as *The Rosetta Stone: the story of the decoding of hieroglyphics* (2001), deliberately omits the trenchant criticism of Champollion's character written by his former teacher in Paris, Professor Sylvestre de Sacy, to Young in London as early as 1815. According to De Sacy, 'If I might venture to advise you, I suggest you do not communicate

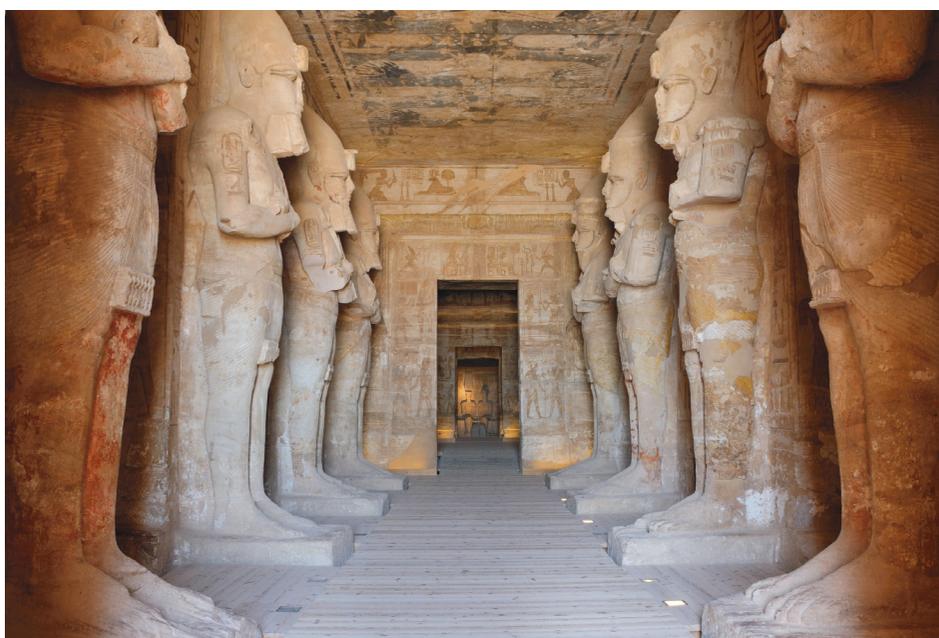
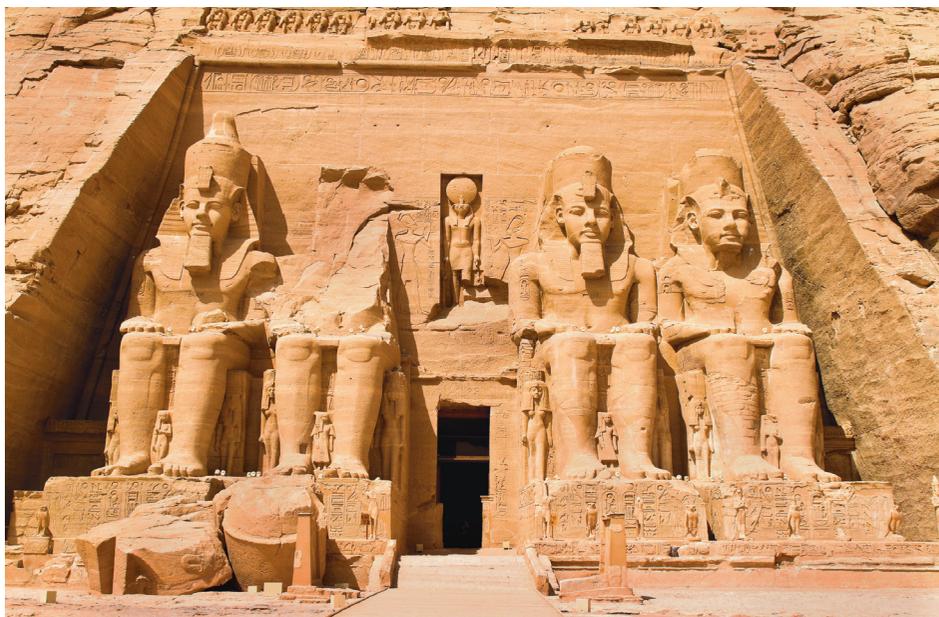
RIGHT & BELOW RIGHT In 1828-29, Jean-François Champollion led a pioneering expedition to Egypt, visiting many ancient sites, including Abu Simbel. His account of his entry into the temple of Ramesses the Great at Abu Simbel highlights his adventurous spirit, in contrast to Young's more staid personality.

and never wanted to go. In founding an Egyptian Society in London in 1817, to publish as many ancient inscriptions and manuscripts as possible, so as to aid the decipherment, Young remarked that funds were needed 'for employing some poor Italian or Maltese to scramble over Egypt in search of more.' Champollion, by contrast, had dreamt of visiting Egypt and doing exactly what Young had depreciated ever since he saw the hieroglyphs as a boy; and when he finally got to Egypt, in 1828-1829, he was able to pass for a native, given his complexion and his excellent command of Arabic.

In his wonderfully readable and ebulliently human *Egyptian Diaries*, Champollion describes entering the temple of Ramesses the Great at Abu Simbel, which was blocked by millennia of sand, with his team:

I almost entirely undressed, wearing only my Arab shirt and long underwear, and pressed myself on my stomach through the small aperture of a doorway which, unearthed, would have been at least twenty-five feet high. It felt as if I was climbing through the heart of a furnace and, gliding completely into the temple, I entered an atmosphere rising to fifty-two degrees: holding a candle in our hand, Rosellini, Ricci, I and one of our Arabs went through this astonishing cave.

Such a perilous adventure would probably not have appealed to Young, even in his carefree youth as an accomplished horseman roughing it in the Scottish Highlands. His motive for 'cracking' the Egyptian scripts was fundamentally philological and scientific, not aesthetic and cultural (unlike his attitude to the Classical literature of Greece and Rome). Many Egyptologists, and humanities scholars in general, tend not to sympathise with this motive. They also know little about Young's scientific work and his renown as someone who initiated many new areas of scientific enquiry and left others to develop



them. Had Nobel prizes existed in Young's day, he would most probably have been awarded two, for his work in physics and in physiology. As a result, some Egyptologists seriously misjudge Young. Not knowing of his fairness in recognising other scientists' contributions and his fanatical truthfulness in his own scientific work, they jump to the obvious conclusion that Young's attitude to Champollion was chiefly envious. Thus two archaeologists, Lesley and Roy Adkins, in *The Keys of Egypt: the race to read the hieroglyphs* (2000), state openly that 'while maintaining civil relations with his rival, Young's jealousy had not ceased to fester.' Not only would such an emotion have been out of character for Young, it would not have made much sense, given his major scientific achievements

and the fact that these were increasingly recognised from 1816 onwards – starting with scientists in France.

For Young, his Egyptian research was essentially yet another fascinating avenue of knowledge to explore for his own amusement. For Champollion, the success of his decipherment was a matter of 'make or break' as a scholar. ■

FURTHER READING

Andrew Robinson (2023) *The Last Man Who Knew Everything* (OpenBook Publishers, ISBN 978-1805110187, £26.38).

Andrew Robinson (2022) *Cracking the Egyptian Code* (Thames & Hudson, ISBN 978-0500296929, £12.99).