

# Hero of the hieroglyphs



1

**Andrew Robinson** traces the life of the French archaeologist Jean-François Champollion, who deciphered the tantalising inscriptions of Ancient Egypt

**O**n 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 Sir 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

**1. Detail from portrait of Jean-François Champollion painted in 1832 (the year of his death) by Léon Cogniet. Musée du Louvre, Paris. © The Art Archive/Alamy.**

**2. and 3. The Egyptian Hall, built in 1812, in London's Piccadilly, engraving from an 1828 drawing by Thomas Shepherd. This was an early example of the effect of Egyptomania, which permeated the design of everything from buildings and monuments to fashion and jewellery. Inside the Hall was a reconstruction of a pharaoh's tomb chamber arranged by Belzoni. After Champollion's decipherment, it was identified as that of Seti I. © The Trustees of the British Museum?.**



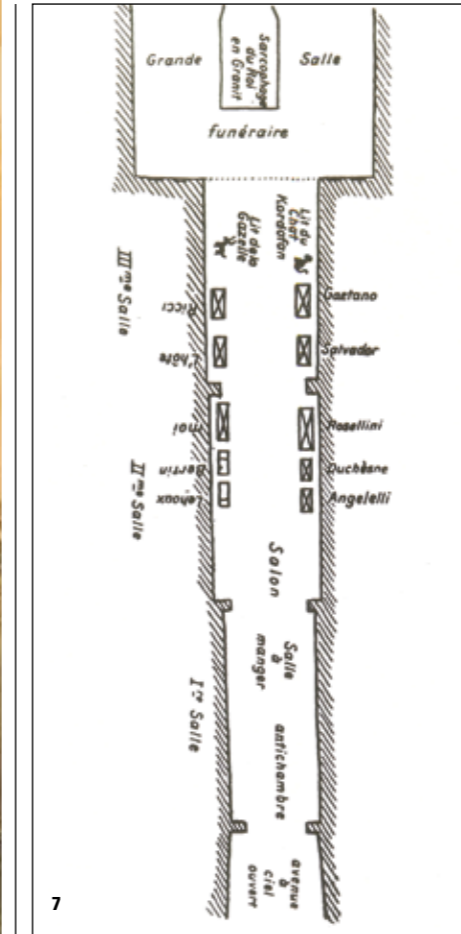
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1821, no one – not even Champollion – knew the answer, because no one could confidently read the hieroglyphic script, despite the tantalising Greek alphabetic clues in the Rosetta Stone, which had arrived in London in 1799 and had been on display at 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



3



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.

8. A graffito made on a pillar of the temple of Karnak in Luxor in 1829. © Tony Roddam/Alamy.

called Paris 'Babel'. But he did not enjoy the spartan conditions as a boarder at Grenoble's state *lycée*, which he attended from 1804–7 on the insistence of his brother, who struggled to pay his school fees. Immediately he entered the school, he took refuge in philological research that had nothing to do with his proper studies. His schoolboy letters to his brother demanded numerous erudite works, such as *Ludolphi Ethiopica*

*grammatica*, a Latin grammar of the Ethiopic script, which his bibliophile brother did his best to procure. By 1807, he had focused on Ancient Egypt, stimulated by the presence in Grenoble of Joseph Fourier, one of Napoleon's cultural *savants* in Egypt, who had a major collection of Egyptian antiquities and who was at that time researching his prestigious 'historical preface' to the first volume of the government's *Description de l'Égypte* with the help of the Champollion brothers.

In 1807–9, supported by Fourier and by his brother, Champollion 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

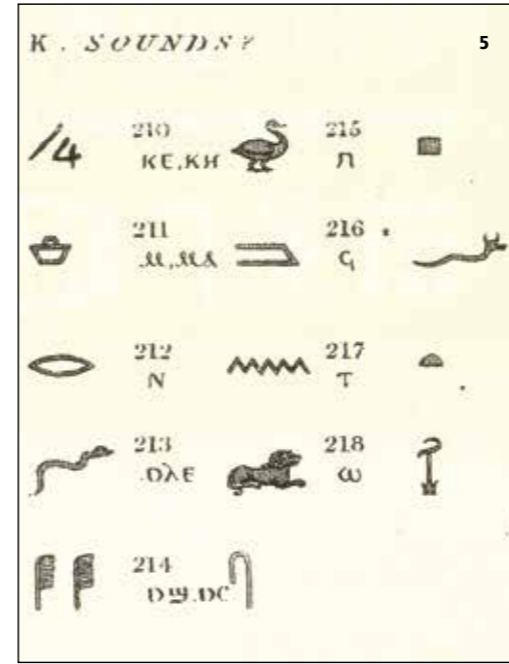
identified with Psammis, Psammis-uthis, or even Psammetichus, the name of an Egyptian ruler mentioned in the writings of Herodotus, Manetho and Pliny: three celebrated ancient historians of Egypt, who were Greek, Egyptian and Roman, respectively. Yet when the exhibition moved to Paris in the second half of 1822, there was no mention of Psammis 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 *Lettre à M. Dacier*, Champollion announced he could read the cartouches of rulers from the Graeco-Roman period of ancient Egypt, such as Alexander, Cleopatra and Ptolemy, but he was not so confident about deciphering those of earlier Egyptian rulers.

4. The Franco-Tuscan Expedition to Egypt at Thebes, painted 1834–6 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.

however, Champollion went on to read these earlier cartouches, and indeed hieroglyphic writing as a whole. Thanks to Champollion's decipherment, the world came to know that Belzoni's sarcophagus is from the tomb of Seti I, a militarily successful pharaoh who was succeeded on his death in 1279 BC by his son Ramesses II, 'the Great'. Jean-François Champollion was born in 1790 in Figeac, in southwestern France, at the edge of the Massif Central, far from the intellectual centres of France. Without the support of his elder brother, Jacques-Joseph, who was 12 years his senior, he would probably be unknown to the world today, given his modest family background, his volcanic personality, his talent for creating devoted enemies as well as close friends, his political sympathy for republicanism during a period

of royalist rule, and his frequently poor health. As Jacques-Joseph remarked after Champollion's premature death at the age of 41, just after his appointment as the world's first professor of Egyptology at the College of France: 'I was, by turns, his father, his master and his pupil.' In later life, Jacques-Joseph himself would become a noted scholar. Known as Champollion-Figeac, he edited his late brother's papers for publication in the 1830s and after. In 1801, Jean-François moved from Figeac to Grenoble, to live with his brother. He would reside there until 1821, with breaks in Figeac and Paris, and would regard Grenoble as home. Although Paris made him famous, he dreaded the city because of its poor sanitary conditions and its political infighting: he privately



words. But he failed: the first of his many failed attempts to decipher the Egyptian scripts.

In 1814-15, now as a professor at the University of Grenoble, Champollion tried again, after appealing to London for an accurate copy of the Rosetta Stone, which brought him into contact with Thomas Young, who cautiously agreed to help. But again he abandoned the attempt, as politics intervened. Napoleon escaped from Elba and arrived in Grenoble, where Champollion's elder brother became his secretary. At a meeting with the two brothers, the Egyptophile Napoleon enthusiastically offered to publish Champollion's Coptic dictionary and grammar in Paris. But after Napoleon's fall from power a few months later, the Champollion brothers lost their positions in Grenoble and were exiled to Figeac in 1816-17. In Paris, Champollion's most influential professor, Sylvestre de Sacy, who was a royalist by inclination, warned Young that Champollion was a potential plagiarist of his British colleague's work and probably a 'charlatan'.

In 1815, Young had hardly begun his research, but during the next three years he was highly productive

9. 'Cleopatra's Obelisk' in Alexandria, watercolour by Dominique Vivant Denon painted in July 1798, after the arrival of the French expedition. © Searight Collection, London.



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 1814-19. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

11. Illustration of a bas relief from Abu Simbel showing Ramesses II in a chariot, from Champollion's *Monuments de l'Égypte et de la Nubie*. © Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

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, Ptolemy and Berenice, Young analysed into a chart of 13 phonetic symbols, which he cautiously labelled 'SOUNDS?': 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, spelt 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 1817-21 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 Young's article, 'Egypt', with its prescient mixture of (partly correct) phonetic and symbolic signs.

In early 1822, Champollion



12. A manuscript page from Champollion's *Grammaire égyptienne*, published in 1836.

13. *Monuments de l'Égypte et de la Nubie* by Champollion, published after his death by his brother Jacques-Joseph in 1835-45. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Further analysis led to his most important publication in 1824, *Précis du système hiéroglyphique des anciens Égyptiens*. 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, in one and the same sentence, and, I might even venture, in one and the same word.' A century later, in 1922, in the Valley of the Kings,

Champollion's brilliant insight enabled the cartouche of another unknown pharaoh to be immediately read by its discoverer, Howard Carter – as 'Tutankhamun'. ■

• *Cracking the Egyptian Code: The Revolutionary Life of Jean-François Champollion* by Andrew Robinson is published in paperback by Thames and Hudson at £9.99.

