For my wife Dipli
'moromere'

On the cover:
Front: Leon Cogniet, *Portrait of Jean-Paul Champollion*, 1831 (oil on canvas). Louvre, Paris, France/Bridgeman Images.
Back: Page from Champollion's Egyptian notebooks. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.
Background: Last line of the Rosetta Stone (in hieroglyphic, demotic and Greek), drawing by Thomas Young, 1819. Photo Andrew Robinson. (Image shown in reflection on back cover.)

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PREFACE: DECIPHERING TUTANKHAMUN

When, in 1822, the world's first Egyptologist, Jean-François Champollion, announced his initial decipherment of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, no one had heard the name Tutankhamun for some three millennia. Not even fellow specialists in Egyptian history were aware of this pharaoh – unlike, for example, Ramesses, who was known from ancient Egyptian historical sources written in Greek. The 'boy king' had been consigned to oblivion by his own people – which ironically would ensure the survival of his entrancing, gold-filled tomb until modern times. After this was dramatically discovered in 1922 in the Valley of the Kings near modern Luxor (ancient Thebes) by archaeologist Howard Carter, Tutankhamun was immediately identified from its hieroglyphic inscriptions, and rapidly became world famous. Today, Tutankhamun is undoubtedly the most celebrated of ancient Egyptians.

He first peered out of history in the late 1820s when the pioneer Egyptologist John Gardner Wilkinson began exploring the Nile Valley and the Eastern Desert between the river and the Red Sea. At a remote site east of Edfu, Wilkinson's 'eagle eyes noted a stone block bearing the names of Tutankhamun' – notably in the form of his throne name Nebkheperura ('[the sun god] Ra is the lord of manifestations').

At the same time, Wilkinson's friend Lord Prudhoe was exploring Upper Nubia. At Gebel Barkal, near the fourth cataract of the Nile, he discovered two striking statues of recumbent lions, carved from a block of red granite. Created by the pharaoh Amenhotep III, grandfather of Tutankhamun, in the 14th century BC, they had been restored by Tutankhamun with a dedicatory inscription in his name. In 1835, Prudhoe presented the lions to the British Museum, where they later became the first objects to greet visitors to the museum's Egyptian sculpture gallery.

Further references to Tutankhamun followed in the second half of the 19th century. At Amarna, tomb reliefs, royal inscriptions and the clay tablets known as the Amarna Letters revealed that Tutankhamun's father, the pharaoh Akhenaten, had broken so radically with tradition

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that after his death he and his associates had been erased from the official record. Hence Tutankhamun's consignment to oblivion.

Another important reference to Tutankhamun appeared in 1905: hieroglyphic inscriptions on a great stone stela in the temple of Karnak, north of Luxor. The dedicatory inscription described the restoration of Karnak and other temples by Tutankhamun after their abandonment by Akhenaten. Apparently, Tutankhamun had rejected his father's teachings and returned Thebes to its former religious and royal status.

Now the hunt was on to find his tomb. In 1909, Theodore Davis – a businessman turned archaeologist – claimed to have located it, when he discovered a small, undecorated, mud-filled chamber in the Valley. Though clearly abandoned in antiquity, it contained fragments of gold foil with the names of Tutankhamun and his wife, plus other objects bearing the king's name. In 1912, Davis controversially concluded that 'the Valley of the Tombs is now exhausted'. Yet the highly experienced Carter, who had once worked for Davis, was unconvinced. With the help of his sponsor Lord Carnarvon, he went on relentlessly searching for Tutankhamun's tomb. On 4 November 1922, he discovered a promising first step, leading down into the Valley floor. He and his workforce began to dig.

Soon Carter revealed the upper part of a door stamped with the seal impressions of the royal necropolis. But it was getting dark, and they had to stop. 'With some reluctance I re-closed the small hole I had made, filled in our excavation for protection during the night, selected the most trustworthy of my workmen – themselves almost as excited as I was – to watch all night above the tomb, and so home by moonlight, riding down the Valley', Carter later wrote in *The Tomb of Tut.Ankh.Amen*. Obliged to alert his sponsor before digging further, he sent a telegram to Carnarvon in Britain and awaited his arrival in Luxor. Then, together, they revealed the whole staircase of sixteen steps on 24 November. 'On the lower part the seal impressions were much clearer, and we were able without any difficulty to make out on several of them the name of Tut.ankh.Amen.' This was the key moment in what would become perhaps the greatest of all archaeological discoveries—made possible by the greatest of all archaeological decipherments a century earlier, led by one of the most intriguing figures in the history of archaeology: Champollion.

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 four 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

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.

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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'.

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 afterlife 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.

What was intended to be 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 calcium-copper tetrasilicate. But it arrived by boat from Egypt in August 1821, well after the inauguration of the exhibition, and was immediately deposited in the British Museum, despite Belzoni's strenuous efforts to add it to his exhibition. After the museum's trustees prevaricated about purchase and eventually refused the object in 1824, it was sold 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, and also to assist the widow of Belzoni (who had died in 1823) 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 bustled 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 hierogliphicked 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 1817, 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,

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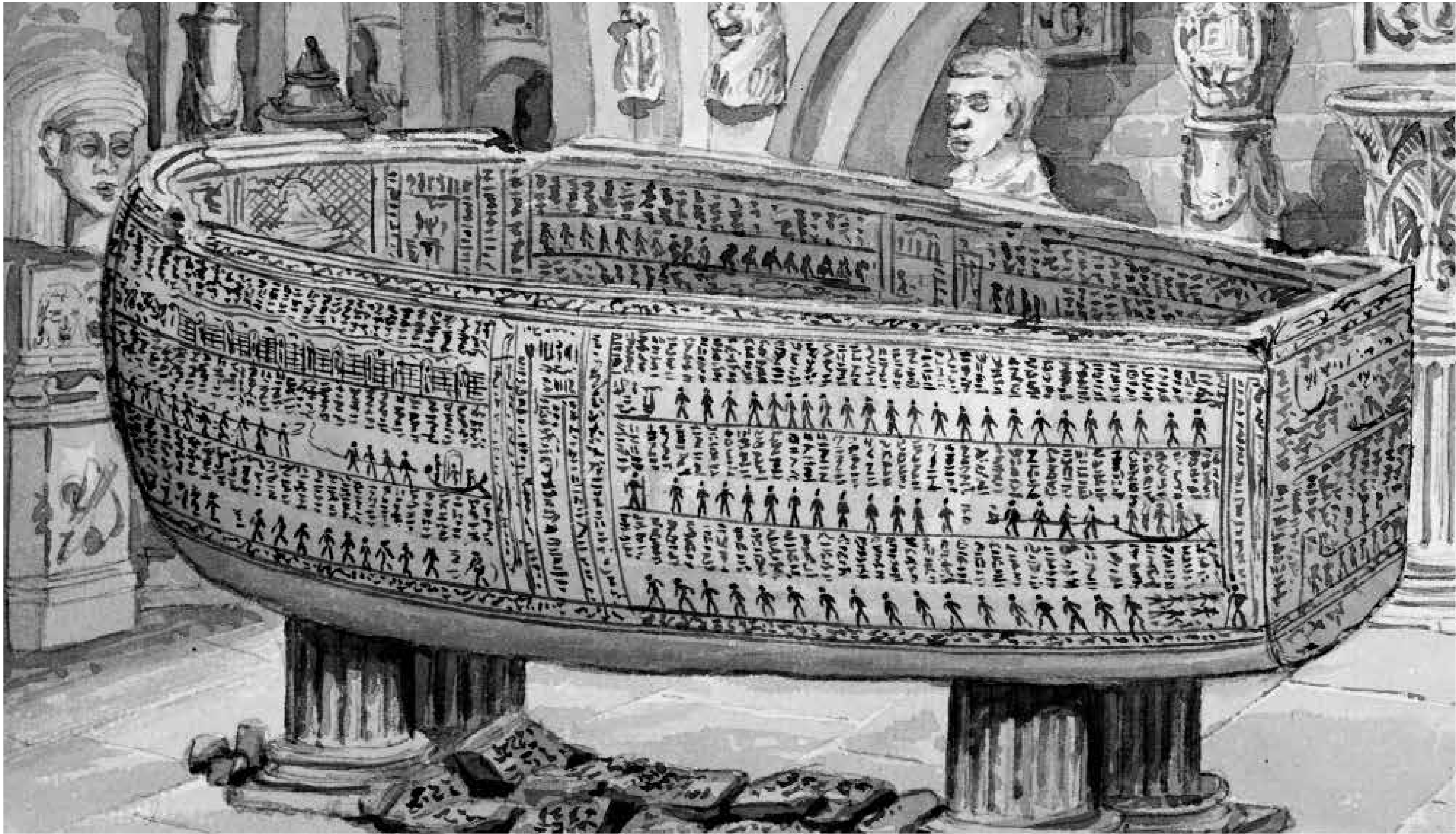

Alabaster sarcophagus of the pharaoh Seti I, discovered in the Valley of the Kings by Giovanni Belzoni, and now in the basement of Sir John Soane's Museum, London.

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

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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, Carter paid tribute to Belzoni as the first serious excavator of ancient Egypt, whose memoirs had inspired Carter's own determined search for Tutankhamun's 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 the most fascinating books in the whole of Egyptian literature', Carter wrote in *The Tomb of Tut.Ankh.Amen*.

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 Ra'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 penurious, 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.

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