



Exhibition

Mummies, myths, and medicine in ancient Egypt

Statue of a scribe, limestone, Egypt, 5th Dynasty, 2494–2345 BCE/
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Hieroglyphs: Unlocking Ancient Egypt

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Hieroglyphs: Unlocking Ancient Egypt

Edited by Ilona Regulska
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This year marks the centenary, and the bicentenary, of two crucial revelations about ancient Egypt. The tomb of Tutankhamun, who died aged only 19 years in circa 1323 BCE, with his gold-masked mummy, was discovered in 1922. The young pharaoh was then virtually unknown even to Egyptologists—unlike some other pharaohs such as Rameses the Great, known to the ancient Greeks as Ozymandias. Imagine for a moment that the huge crowds visiting the glittering Tutankhamun exhibitions during the 20th century had been told by Egyptologists: sorry, we do not know this pharaoh's name and have no idea what the hieroglyphic inscriptions on his tomb and its treasures mean. Several other important ancient scripts, such as Etruscan and Minoan (Linear A), remain undeciphered to this day. Fortunately, this is not the case with the Egyptian hieroglyphs. Unreadable for nearly two millennia, in 1822 the script began to be deciphered in Paris, France, by the world's first professional Egyptologist, Jean-François Champollion—following some pioneering research started in 1814 by Thomas Young, a physician and polymath in London, UK, who happened to be intrigued by ancient Egyptian writing.

The British Museum's imaginatively presented bicentennial exhibition, *Hieroglyphs: Unlocking Ancient Egypt*, tells the forever compelling story

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of Champollion, Young, and their complicated rivalry, pivoting around the museum's most visited object, the Rosetta Stone (now relocated in the exhibition). But its chief concern, rightly, is with the information about this most entrancing of ancient civilisations unlocked by the hieroglyphic decipherment over the past two centuries. In the words of its curator, Ilona Regulska, in the exhibition book she has edited with contributions from many experts: “Thanks to the decipherment of hieroglyphs we know that, just like us, ancient Egyptians made jokes, sent letters, enjoyed literature, married and divorced, and negotiated business deals...The secular nature of much ancient Egyptian writing may be surprising to some, as expressions of passion, politics and personal beliefs have often been overshadowed by religious prayers and monumental propaganda both in scholarly studies and in more general assumptions about ancient Egypt.”

Medicine, and medically related matters such as death, form part of this relatively unfamiliar picture of secular daily life in ancient Egypt. Indeed, Imhotep, architect of the Step Pyramid of Djoser in the third millennium BCE, was worshipped by Egyptians as a god of wisdom, writing, and medicine, and equated

by the ancient Greeks with their own god of medicine, Asklepios, who is mentioned in the original Hippocratic Oath. Some parts of the medical material on display in *Hieroglyphs: Unlocking Ancient Egypt* have no clear religious connection, whereas others do. For example, the London Medical Papyrus from the British Museum's collections, dating from 1550–1295 BCE, describes 61 charms and recipes—some medical, others magical—for skin complaints, burns, eye diseases, and miscarriages. One remedy concerning a skin disease prescribes an unidentified material plus red ochre, Lower Egyptian salt, the fruit of a plant, and the barm (froth) of sweet beer. Another remedy to treat burns recommends anointing with antimicrobial honey and anti-inflammatory incense. Five other recipes are for eye treatments, including antibacterial eyeliner also used for cosmetic purposes: black (galena) and green (malachite) kohl powder, carried around in jars and painted around the eyes as necessary. These scribal treatments are enlivened with displays of ancient remains of therapeutic substances found in their original containers.

Mummy unwrapping as public entertainment began in the 1600s and gathered pace thereafter, especially in the 19th century, when scientists and archaeologists joined in, notably the British surgeon Thomas “Mummy” Pettigrew. In 1698, the unwrapping of the mummy of Aberuait, an individual from Saqqara, dated 332–30 BCE, was described by the French consul in Egypt. Fragments of the mummy's inscribed linen found their way to European cabinets of curiosities and eventually museums. One of these—now in the Louvre Museum, Paris, France, and never before shown in the UK—was published in 1724 as a supposed Egyptian calendar. In the

Temple lintel of King Amenemhat III, Hawara, Egypt, 12th Dynasty, 1855–18 BCE/
© The Trustees of the British Museum



19th century, post-decipherment, the inscribed linen was revealed to feature a spell from the *Book of the Dead*. A facsimile of it, hand-drawn by Champollion in 1811, is also displayed.

Another borrowed exhibit concerns a wrapped mummy of an Egyptian woman, Baketenhor. Her highly decorated cartonnage and coffin, dating from 945–715 BCE, were brought from Egypt to Newcastle in the UK in 1821. Local individuals petitioned for it to be unwrapped for scientific purposes. But although the mummy was removed from its painted cartonnage, it was not unwrapped and was returned to the cartonnage. Instead, Young and Champollion were separately asked for their interpretations of the cartonnage inscription. In 1822, just before Champollion's decipherment breakthrough, Young hesitantly concluded that the religious iconography was intended to appeal to the goodwill of gods, "somewhat in the nature of letters of credit to the next world". Champollion, in 1823, post-breakthrough, deciphered the inscription as a prayer to several deities for the soul of the deceased, although not all of his readings were correct. However, in 1827, he improved his translation.

Radiographic survey and a CT scan of the mummy have revealed Baketenhor to be an adult female 1.57 m in height, with a full set of teeth and no signs of arthritis or bone disease, whose estimated age was between 21 and 35 years at the time of her death. Also visible between the mummy wrappings are several amulets, a winged pectoral (brooch), and an embalming plaque.

As for ancient Egyptian literature about life and the afterlife, the exhibition book cites some immortal poetry written to honour the scribal art found in the British Museum's Chester Beatty Papyrus IV. One verse, translated by a former curator, Richard Parkinson, who is now Professor of Egyptology at

the University of Oxford, UK, reads: "A man has perished: his corpse is dust,/ and his people have passed from the land;/ it is a book which makes him remembered/ in the mouth of a speaker./ More excellent is a roll [of papyrus] than a built house,/ than a chapel in the west./ It is better than an established villa,/ than a stela in a temple." No wonder, notes Parkinson, that the reputation of ancient Egyptian literature has risen. Long regarded by Egyptologists as deficient in intellectual and emotional sophistication, today ancient Egyptian writings are regularly included in anthologies of world literature. The debate reminds me of that between Young and Champollion two centuries ago. Young regarded ancient Egyptian culture as "foolish" and "frivolous", and had no desire to visit the country, whereas Champollion was hooked on Egypt from his schooldays, and became the first Egyptologist to translate its inscriptions on site accurately during his groundbreaking 1828–29 expedition.

Ironically, the most famous ancient Egyptian document of all, the Rosetta Stone, which enabled Egyptian civilisation to be read, is a notably unexciting work. Inscribed in three scripts—Egyptian hieroglyphic and demotic, and the Greek alphabet—in 196 BCE, it is a royal decree. It describes the honours bestowed upon Ptolemy V by the temples of Egypt in return for services the king has rendered to Egypt at home and abroad, in which priestly privileges are listed in great detail. It also notes that the three inscriptions are equivalent in meaning—hence the crucial inference by scholars, after its discovery in 1799, that the Greek section could be regarded as an approximate translation of the hieroglyphic and demotic sections.

Yet even today the Rosetta Stone retains its power to intrigue Egyptologists. For example, the decree states that it should be inscribed in "sacred, native and Greek characters"



Installation of an amulet in front of the Book of the Dead in Hieroglyphs Unleashed
Ancient Egypt © The Trustees of the British Museum

throughout Egypt in "each of the first, second and third rank temples alongside the image of the ever-living king". Whether this was actually done is still not known, despite the discovery of three fragmentary copies of the same decree elsewhere, included in the exhibition. Moreover, the British Museum's standard label for the Stone refers to the hieroglyphs as a "script", the demotic as a "script" but the Greek as a "language". Is it therefore a bilingual, or a trilingual, inscription? Regulski herself favours two underlying languages, Egyptian and Greek, like most Egyptologists, but some of the book's contributors prefer three languages. The puzzle is how to relate the early Egyptian language of the hieroglyphic script, introduced in about 3000 BCE, to the late Egyptian of the demotic script, introduced in the seventh century BCE, as distant as ancient Latin from modern Italian. Regrettably, this important question is overlooked in the accompanying book. That said, this intellectually stimulating and artistically fascinating exhibition successfully brings to life all aspects of ancient Egypt, from the religious and the pharaonic to the secular and the medical.

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