



The Rosetta Stone was found by a French artillery officer called Broussard...

...among the ruins of Fort Saint Julien, near the Rosetta mouth of the Nile, in 1799, but it subsequently came into the possession of the British Government at the capitulation of Alexandria.

The Rosetta Stone records that Ptolemy V. Epiphanes, king of Egypt from B.C. 205 to B.C. 182, conferred great benefits upon the priesthood, and set aside large revenues for the maintenance of the temples, and remitted the taxes due from the people at a period of distress, and undertook and carried out certain costly engineering works in connection with the irrigation system of Egypt. As a part of the plan to do honor to the king it was ordered that a copy of the decree, inscribed on a basalt stele in hieroglyphic, demotic, and Greek characters, should be set up in each of the first, second, and third grade temples. The Rosetta Stone is one of the stelae which, presumably, were set up the temples throughout the length and breadth of the land. But the importance of the stone historically is very much less than its value philologically, for the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphics is centered in it, and it formed the base of the work done by scholars

The Rosetta Stone

Decoding Hieroglyphics

in the past century and a half which has resulted in the restoration of the ancient Egyptian language and literature.

The Egyptian priests continued to use the hieroglyphic writing even as Coptic, Greek, and Latin became the languages of official government use in Egypt and by the end of the 5th century A.D. hieroglyphics had become absolutely a dead letter. Until the beginning of the 19th century there was neither an Oriental nor a European who could either read or understand a hieroglyphic inscription. Many writers pretended to have found the key to the language, and many more professed, with a shameless impudence, to translate the contents of the texts into a modern tongue. Among these claimants Athanasius Kircher declared in the 17th century that he had found the key to hieroglyphics; the translations in his *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* are utter nonsense, as are the claims of the Comte de Pahlin, a half century later, that the inscriptions are translations of Biblical phrases and Hebrew compositions.

In the first half of the 18th century Warburton appears to have divined the existence of alphabetic characters in Egyptian. Zoëga came to the conclusion that the hieroglyphics were letters and that the ovals, called *catouches* because they resembled cartridges, which occur throughout the inscriptions contained royal names. It was left to two 19th century scholars, Young of England and Champollion of France, to restore to hieroglyphics that meaning that had been lost to it for fifteen hundred years. Young, prior to Champollion, correctly succeeded in identifying the names of Ptolemy, Bernice, and six Egyptian gods in the Rosetta inscription. He also accurately established the meaning of several ideographs, as well as the correct values of six letters of the Egyptian alphabet. The more complete success of his rival Champollion can be attributed in part to Young's own work, of which Champollion knew. But it was as much Champollion's special training in Coptic and the fortuitous increased excavation of Egyptian ruins that led to the Frenchman's greater success and fame.

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