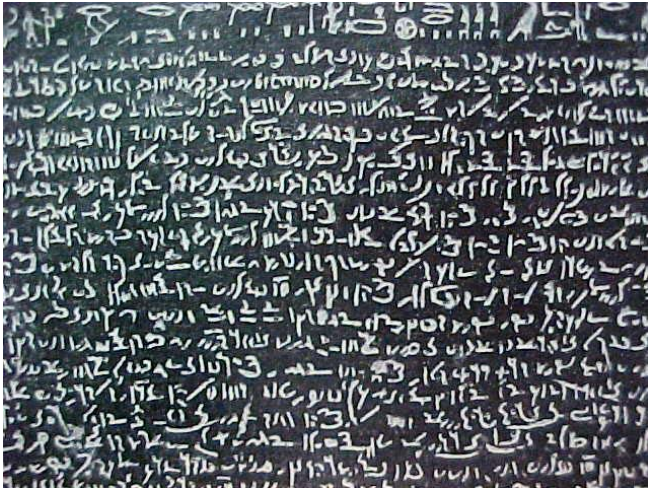


July 22nd 2005

The Rosetta Stone

By Paola Lizares



One of the stars of the British Museum

July 15th, 1799. French Captain Pierre-François Bouchard was guiding some construction works in Rosetta, Egypt. Suddenly, he heard some of his men shout. Buried in the ground, they had found a beautiful black granite stone with thousands of tiny inscriptions. They named the stone after the city in which it had lain hidden for almost two thousand years.

The Rosetta Stone was soon after taken to the Institut de l'Égypte in Cairo. This institution had been founded by Napoleon Bonaparte a year before. The scientists and researchers of the Institut immediately understood that the stone was extremely valuable. Not only for its beauty, not only for its ancientness, but especially because it was a key to the understanding of Egyptian hieroglyphs.

The tiny inscriptions carved on the Rosetta Stone were not the same. There were elaborate pictures of birds, snakes, parts of the body and ordinary objects; these were Egyptian hieroglyphs, the language of the gods and the high clergy. There were less figurative doodles of something that looked a bit like Arabic or Hebrew; this was Egyptian demotic script, the

language of the people. And then there were some characters that –thank goodness!– looked wonderfully familiar: the good old Greek alphabet.

The Institut de L'Égypte could easily read the Greek text. It turned out to be a rather boring decree dictated by Ptolemy V about some taxes that he had repealed and some statues that were to be erected in such and such temples. However, the decree all of a sudden became interesting when it self-consciously said that it was to be published not only in hieroglyphs, but also in demotic script and in Greek. The same text in three different scripts. Now researchers could use the Greek text to decipher the mysterious Egyptian hieroglyphs...

This extremely difficult task was accomplished by Jean-François Champollion from 1822 to 1824. A thirty-four year old professor of History at Grenoble, he was a man endowed with a superior talent for languages, having mastered twenty languages, ten of them Asian, by the age of twenty. He confirmed the hypothesis that, although some of the hieroglyphs were *logographs* (i.e. they represented a word or a concept), many of them were simply phonetic symbols.

Thanks to Bouchard's fortunate discovery and Champollion's hard work, archaeologists today can understand the secrets behind hundreds of buildings, monuments and daily objects that belonged to an ancient civilisation. The day will come when our own proud civilisation will disappear. Will we be forgotten by future civilisations? Will our languages become dust in an attic? Or will there be something – a stone, a book, a chip – that will help the researchers of future civilisations to catch a glimpse of their past?

This article is licensed under the <http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl/html> GNU Free Documentation License. It uses material from the http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosetta_stone Wikipedia article "Rosetta Stone".