

[The following selection is from C. W. Ceram, *Hands on the Past* (New York: Knopf, 1966) pp. 162-166]

*Jean François Champollion (1790-1832) was born at Figeac and early showed signs of an amazing aptitude for languages which was fostered and encouraged by his self-effacing elder brother. When he was sixteen years old he read a paper to the Academy at Grenoble which astonished the scholars who heard it and, at an age when most pupils were still seeking admission, he was made a teacher. His work was often interrupted by the political disturbances of the age, but in 1821 he was able to bring out the paper which proved to be the definitive solution to the Egyptian hieroglyphs. His ideas were in direct contradiction to those propounded by most scholars of his day, and met with bitter opposition, but his work successfully withstood all tests and acceptance could not long be denied. In 1831 a Chair was specially created for him at the Collège de France in recognition of his achievement.*

### **Letter to M. Dacier concerning the alphabet of the phonetic hieroglyphs**

Sir, It is to your generous patronage that I owe the indulgent attention which the *Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* has been pleased to accord to my work on the Egyptian scripts, in allowing me to submit to it my two reports on the *hieratic*, or priestly, script and the *demotic*, or popular one; after this flattering trial, I may as last venture to hope that I have successfully shown that these two types of writing are neither of them composed of alphabetic letters, as had been so widely supposed, but consist of *ideograms*, like the hieroglyphs themselves, that is, expressing the *concepts* rather than the *sounds* of a language; and to believe that after ten years of dedicated study I have reached that point where I can put together an almost complete survey of the general structure of these two forms of writing, the origin, nature, form and number of their signs, the rules for their combination by means of those symbols which fulfil purely logical and grammatical functions, thus laying the first foundations for what might be termed the *grammar* and *dictionary* of these two scripts, which are found on the majority of monuments, and the interpretation of which will throw so much light on the general history of Egypt. With regard to the *demotic* script in particular, there is enough of the precious Rosetta inscription to identify the whole; scholastic criticism is indebted first to the talents of your illustrious colleague, M. Silvestre de Sacy, and successively to the late M. Akerblad and Dr Young, for the first accurate ideas drawn from this monument, and it is from this same inscription that I have deduced the series of demotic symbols which, taking on syllabic-alphabetic values, were used in *ideographic* texts to express the proper names of persons from outside Egypt. It is by this means also that the name of the Ptolemies was discovered, both in this same inscription and in a papyrus manuscript recently brought from Egypt.

Accordingly, it only remains, in completing my study of the three types of Egyptian writing, for me to produce my account of the pure *hieroglyphs*. I dare to hope that my latest efforts will also have a favourable reception from your famous society, whose goodwill has been so valuable an encouragement to me.

However, in the present condition of Egyptian studies, when relics abound on every side, collected by kings as much as by connoisseurs, and when, too, with regard to these relics, the world's scholars eagerly devote themselves to laborious researches and strive for an intimate understanding of those written memorials which must serve to explain the rest, I do not think I should delay in offering to these scholars, under your honoured auspices, a short but vital list of new discoveries, which belong properly to my account on the *hieroglyphic* script, and which will undoubtedly spare

them the pains I took in establishing them, and perhaps also some grave misconceptions about the various periods of the history of Egyptian culture and government in general: for we are dealing with the series of *hieroglyphs* which, making an exception to the general nature of the signs of this script, were given the property of expressing word *sounds*, and served for the inscription on Egyptian national monuments of the *titles, names and surnames of the Greek or Roman rulers* who successively governed the country. Many truths concerning the history of this famous country must spring from this new result of my researches, to which I was led quite naturally.

The interpretation of the *demotic* text on the Rosetta inscription, by means of the accompanying Greek text, had made me realise that the Egyptians used a certain number of *demotic* characters, which assumed the property of expressing sounds, to introduce into their ideographic writings *proper names* and *words foreign to the Egyptian language*. We see at once the indispensable need for such a practice in an ideographic system of writing. The Chinese, who also use an ideographic script, have an exactly similar provision, created for the same reason. The Rosetta monument shows us the application of this auxiliary method of writing, which I have termed *phonetic*, that is, expressing the sounds, in the proper names of the kings *Alexander* and *Ptolemy*, the queens *Arsinoe* and *Berenice*, in the proper names of six other persons, *Aetes*, *Pyrrha*, *Philius*, *Areia*, *Diogenes* and *Irene*, and in the Greek words *SYNTAXIS* and *OYENN*...

The hieroglyphic text of the Rosetta inscription, which would have lent itself so felicitously to this study, owing to its cracks, yielded only the name *Ptolemy*.

The obelisk found on the island of Philae and recently brought to London also contains the hieroglyphic name of a Ptolemy, written in the same symbols as on the Rosetta inscription and similarly enclosed in a cartouche, and this is followed by a second cartouche, which must contain the proper name of a woman, a Ptolemaic queen, since this cartouche ends with the feminine hieroglyphic signs which also follow the hieroglyphic proper names of every Egyptian goddess without exception. The obelisk was, as it were, *tied* to a pedestal bearing a Greek inscription which is a supplication from the priests of Isis at Philae to the king, Ptolemy, his sister Cleopatra and his wife Cleopatra. If this obelisk and its hieroglyphic inscription resulted from the plea of the priests, who actually mention the consecration of a similar monument, the cartouche with the female name could only be that of a Cleopatra. This name, and that of Ptolemy, which have certain like letters in Greek, had to serve for a comparative study of the hieroglyphic symbols which composed the two; and if identical signs in these two names stood for *the same sounds* in both cartouches, they would have to be *entirely phonetic* in character.

A preliminary comparison had also made me realise that these same two names, written phonetically in the demotic script, contained a number of identical characters. The resemblance between the three Egyptian scripts in their general principles caused me to look for the same phenomenon and the same correspondences when the same names were given *in hieroglyphs*: this was soon confirmed by simple comparison of the hieroglyphic cartouche containing the name Ptolemy and that on the Philae obelisk which I believed, according to the Greek text, must contain the name Cleopatra.

The first sign in the name *Cleopatra*, which resembles a kind of *quadrant*, and which would represent the *K*, should have been absent from the name Ptolemy. It was.

The second sign, a *lion couchant*, which would give the *L*, is exactly similar to the fourth sign in the name Ptolemy, also an *L* (*Pto*).

The third sign in the name Cleopatra is a *feather* or *leaf* standing for the short vowel *E*; we also see two similar *leaves* at the end of the name Ptolemy, which, from their position, can only have the value of the diphthong *AI*, in *AIOS*.

The fourth character in the cartouche for the hieroglyphic Cleopatra, the representation of a kind of *flower with a bent stem*, would stand for the *O* in the Greek name of this queen. It is in fact the third character in the name Ptolemy (*Pto*).

The fifth sign in the name Cleopatra, which appears as a parallelogram and must represent the *P*, is equally the first sign in the hieroglyphic name Ptolemy.

The sixth sign, standing for the vowel *A* of *KLEOPATPA*, is a *hawk*, and does not occur in the name Ptolemy, nor should it.

The seventh character is an *open hand*, representing the *T*; but this hand does not occur in the word Ptolemy, where the second letter, the *T*, is expressed by a *segment of a circle*, which, none the less, is also a *T*; for we shall see below why these two hieroglyphs have the same sound.

The eighth sign of *KLEOPATPA*, which is a frontal *mouth*, and which would be the *P*, does not occur in the cartouche of Ptolemy, nor should it.

Finally, the ninth and last sign in the queen's name, which must be the vowel *A*, is in fact the *hawk* which we have already seen representing this vowel in the third syllable of the same name. This proper name ends in the two hieroglyphic symbols for the feminine gender: that of Ptolemy ends in another sign, which consists of a bent shaft, equivalent to the Greek *S*, as we shall see below.

The combined signs from the two cartouches, analysed phonetically, thus already yielded us twelve signs, corresponding to eleven consonants, vowels or diphthongs in the Greek alphabet, *A, AI, E, K, L, M, O, P, R, S, T*.

The phonetic value of these twelve signs, already very probable, becomes indisputable if, applying these values to other cartouches or small enclosed panels containing proper names and taken from Egyptian hieroglyphic monuments, we are enabled to read them effortlessly and systematically, producing the proper names of rulers foreign to the Egyptian language...

You, sir, will doubtless share all my astonishment when the same alphabet of phonetic hieroglyphs, applied to a host of other cartouches carved on the same piece of work, will give you titles, names and even surnames of Roman emperors, spoken in *Greek* and written with these same phonetic hieroglyphs.

We read here, in fact:

The imperial title *autokrator*, occupying a whole cartouche to itself, or else followed by other *still persisting* ideographic titles, transcribed *AOTOKRTR, AOTKRTR, AOTAKRTR* and even *AOTOKLTL*, the *L* being used as a bastard substitute (pardon the expression) for the *R*.

The cartouches containing this title are almost always next to, or connected with, a second cartouche containing, as we shall shortly see, the *proper names* of emperors. But occasionally we also find this word in absolutely isolated cartouches...

But it remains, sir, for us to survey briefly the nature of the phonetic system governing the writing of these names, to form an accurate estimate of the character of the signs used, and to investigate the reasons for adopting the image of one or another object to represent a particular consonant or vowel more than another...