

Decoding Egyptian Hieroglyphs

The ancient Egyptians used hieroglyphs to record events, keep financial records, and write stories and poetry. But after centuries of occupation by foreign rulers, no one knew how to read the ancient writing. The Rosetta Stone provided the key to decoding the hieroglyphs.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Narrator

First Greek Visitor

Second Greek Visitor

First French Soldier

Second French Soldier

Horapollo: a Greek writer

Athanasius Kircher: German priest

C.J. de Guignes: French scholar

First French Scholar

Second French Scholar

Sylvestre de Sacy: French language expert

Johan Akerblad: Swedish diplomat

Dr. Thomas Young: English scientist and scholar

Jean-Francois Champollion: French linguist

Scene 1

Narrator: It is the seventh century A.D. Two Greek scholars are visiting Egypt.

First Greek Visitor: Aren't these the most peculiar marks on the temple walls?

Second Greek Visitor: They are like the ones we saw in the pharaoh's tomb. And the ones we saw on that old ruin by the river. What do you think they mean?

First Greek Visitor: I wish I knew. Let's ask an Egyptian scholar to translate for us.

Narrator: The two Greeks asked several Egyptian scholars to translate, but no one knew what the ancient writing meant.

First Greek Visitor: These must be sacred carvings.

Second Greek Visitor: Yes. I think they must be some sort of picture writing.

PERFORMANCE ACTIVITY CONTINUED

Scene 2

Narrator: The Egyptians didn't know what the writing meant because centuries earlier, the picture writing, or hieroglyphs, had been replaced by Coptic, the language spoken by Christian Egyptians. Coptic had been replaced by Arabic when Arabs conquered Egypt in A.D. 642. Scholars had tried to decipher the hieroglyphs, but none had been successful. Finally, a Greek writer named Horapollo studied the picture writing.

Horapollo: I think I've got it. This goose sign must mean son since geese take care of their eggs. And this rabbit sign must mean open because a rabbit never closes its eyes.

Narrator: Horapollo wrote what he thought several pictures meant, and other scholars read his work and accepted his conclusions. They continued to work on translating the hieroglyphs. Meanwhile, a German priest named Athanasius Kircher wrote a grammar and vocabulary of Coptic, the language of the Christian Egyptians. He turned his attention to the hieroglyphs around 1650.

Athanasius Kircher: I think the hieroglyphs must be connected to the ancient Egyptian worship of several gods. Maybe these are sacred writings praising the gods and asking their blessing so that the Nile River would continue to flood the land and ensure plentiful crops.

Narrator: Kircher's theory was wrong, but many scholars believed he was right. They based their studies of hieroglyphs on what he had written. Then a French scholar in the 1700s saw something others hadn't noticed.

C.J. de Guignes: There are some pictures that are enclosed within an oval—as if someone intended the pictures to go together to mean one thing. Or maybe they just wanted them to stand out. I'll bet each of those ovals contains an important name, like the name of a pharaoh.

Scene 3

Narrator: The Frenchman was right, but then he went off in the wrong direction. He compared the hieroglyphs with Chinese picture writing and decided that the Chinese must have come from Egypt! The secrets of ancient Egypt were still locked away in the mysterious writing that no one could read. A real breakthrough occurred when the French emperor Napoleon invaded Egypt. At the northern city of Rosetta, some of his soldiers made an amazing discovery in 1799.

First French Soldier: Hey, this old fort wall is going to tumble. Let's tear it down before it collapses on us.

Second French Soldier: Men, come over here and let's move these old stones.

Narrator: The soldiers worked hard, tearing down the wall, until one soldier noticed something unusual.

First French Soldier: Hold on. What is that black rock?

Second French Soldier: It's got writing on it, but a corner's missing. Are there any more pieces of it?

PERFORMANCE ACTIVITY CONTINUED

Narrator: The soldiers was taken to a group of French scholars. They agreed that the stone appeared to contain writing in three different languages. The top section was in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. The middle section was unknown, and the bottom section was in Greek. The scholars were able to translate the Greek into French. The writing contained words of praise for Ptolomy V, a Greek ruler of Egypt who reigned around 200 B.C. The Greeks had conquered Egypt more than one hundred years before, and a dynasty of Greek pharaohs had taken control. And introduced their language to Egypt.

First French Scholar: The last line says that this decree is being carved in stone in a sacred language, in the native language, and in Greek. That must mean that all three passages say the same thing.

Second French Scholar: I believe you're right. We'll call the second language demotic, since it must be the native language, and demotic means "of the people." It looks as though it is written in cursive. See, the letters are connected.

Scene 4

Narrator: While the scholars studied the stone, now called the Rosetta Stone in honor of where it was found, the English invaded Egypt and defeated the French. As victors, they demanded all the scholar's research. They didn't get it all, but they got the Rosetta Stone. The French made rubbings of the stone so they could work on translating the other two writings. Other scholars also made attempts to decipher the pictures.

Sylvestre de Sacy: Maybe I can crack the code. Looks to me like this word in Greek is this word in demotic script. I'm sure that's right, but I don't know how to proceed from there.

Narrator: Then a pupil of de Sacy's made some progress.

Johan Akerblad: I think there must be a demotic alphabet. If I consider each different mark as a letter, I think I can figure out this second language.

Narrator: He was half right. Of the 29 letters he identified, almost half were correct. But he assumed the language didn't use pictures, and he made no more progress. The stone was now at the British Museum where it caught the attention of Dr. Thomas Young.

Dr. Thomas Young: Let's see, there must be a mistake in the reasoning up to now. Why, look! This word Ptolomy in Greek must be this word in demotic, and this demotic word resembles these hieroglyphs. That's it! Demotic must be a combination of hieroglyphs and letters.

Narrator: Young published his findings in the 1819 supplement of the Encyclopedia Britannica. He believed some of the hieroglyphs were sound related instead of merely pictures. Other scholars continued the study. In France, Jean-Francois Champollion took up the challenge. He mastered Coptic, the language of the Christian Egyptians and studied it for keys to demotic passages.

PERFORMANCE ACTIVITY CONTINUED

Jean-Francois Champollion: If only I had another name like Ptolomy that I could translate in all three languages.

Narrator: An inscription in both Greek and hieroglyphs was found in the ruins of a temple. On it, Jean-Francois found another name and was able to figure out some of the symbols. He cracked the code and ran to his brother.

Jean-Francois Champollion: I've got it! I've got it!

Narrator: Champollion was so excited that, after telling his brother, he fainted. But he did have it. He had decoded the Rosetta Stone. He published a book about his findings in 1824. Then he worked on an Egyptian grammar and a dictionary but died before he could finish them. His brother finished the project. Still, not all the hieroglyphs were translated.

Scholars continued to work on the translations and by the early 1900s, a complete transcript of all three languages on the Rosetta Stone was complete. It had taken over 100 years to figure out the puzzle. Now scholars were able to translate hieroglyphs and the demotic language found on scrolls in Egyptian tombs. These scrolls provided a wealth of information on the history of ancient Egypt, its rulers, and its people.