

The Race to Decipherment

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Abstract

Napoleon's expedition to Egypt (1798/1799) and the subsequent publication of the *Description de l'Égypte* (1809–1828), illustrating the monuments, people, and cities of Egypt, fuelled public and scholarly interest in its ancient civilization. Yet, the evidence necessary to reconstruct the Egyptian writing system was still limited. European scholars had relatively few objects to work with, along with inaccurate copies of inscriptions created by predecessors and peers who could not read what they were copying. With the Rosetta Stone's discovery in 1799, hope soared that those ancient voices could be brought to life through the Greek version of its texts, especially in combination with the evidence available from Coptic, the last stage of the Ancient Egyptian language. This proved harder than expected, and it would take another two decades. The decipherment would hinge on two scholars, British polymath Thomas Young (1773–1829) and French philologist Jean-François Champollion (1790–1832). The breakthrough belonged to Champollion, a linguistic prodigy who mastered Coptic, ancient Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Syriac, Persian, and Arabic. However, the work of Young and others, though Champollion did not agree with all of it, helped solve the riddle of ancient Egyptian.