

Champollions Entzifferung. Ist 1822 das Epochenjahr? (Champollion's Decipherment. Is 1822 the Epochal Year?)

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Abstract

Typically, it is assumed that Jean-François Champollion deciphered the hieroglyphs in 1822 and that since then, modern scholars were able to read Ancient Egyptian texts. The Rosetta Stone is assumed to have played a crucial role. This article intends to demonstrate that the true course of events was much more complicated. What Champollion achieved in 1822 was establishing the true value of most one-consonantal signs as used for rendering Greek and Roman names—at that time, he was still in the middle of a turn away from earlier ideas that the hieroglyphs were purely symbolic. With the results of his *Lettre à Monsieur Dacier* published in 1822, not a single Egyptian text can be read. Earlier, at most partially successful efforts at deciphering the Egyptian scripts (Demotic and Hieroglyphs) are presented. The further development of Champollions insights up to 1824, when the *Précis du système hiéroglyphique* was published, is followed. There, Champollion extends the phonetic use of hieroglyphs much further (sometimes even too far). Still, even with those results alone not a single Egyptian text can be accurately read and translated. It can be demonstrated that Champollion, in that book, is by no means free from the guesswork and the errors which are typically reproached to his rival Thomas Young. Serious doubt is cast on the narrative that Champollion had brilliant insights concerning the names of Ramses and Thutmosis on the morning of 14 September 1822. The Rosetta Stone was much more important for inspiring the earlier, at most partially successful efforts at decipherment than for Champollion's final results.