

## Thomas Young and the Decipherment of Egyptian Hieroglyphs

The decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs has captured the interest and fascination of both scholars and the public for nearly two centuries. The discovery of the Rosetta Stone by Napoleon's force in Egypt, the drama of its ceding to the British and eventual transfer to the British Museum, followed two decades later by the decipherment of the scripts are perhaps the most widely known and written about events in the history of European engagement with antiquity. The first accounts of the decipherment concentrated on the dramatic confrontation between the partisans of the English polymath, Thomas Young (1773-1829) and the young French firebrand, Jean-François Champollion (1790-1832). Over the decades since, as Egyptology formed into a coherent discipline, historians, both academic and popular, have for the most part focused on the period just before and after 1822, for in that year Champollion's famous *Lettre à Dacier* unveiled his system in the very presence of Thomas Young at a meeting of the *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* on Friday, September 27. Arguments ran back and forth for decades, not infrequently with nationalist overtones on both sides, over whether Champollion had taken anything of substance from Young.

The contretemps orbited about two issues: first, who, and when, had discovered the phonological cognate of a given hieroglyph, and second, was Champollion correct in his claim that the Egyptian script was principally, if not simply, phonographic, indeed even alphabetic? The second of the two disputes gradually evaporated, despite considerable initial opposition, and not only in England, as Champollion's work,

suitably revised, achieved widespread acceptance. The first however remains a central (and on occasion still controversial) element in every history of the subject since the late 19th century. Yet a great deal more lies behind these events than whether it was Young or Champollion who first deciphered a given grapheme. For the two men, who came from entirely different backgrounds, differed as well over what it means to 'translate' a passage written in a forgotten script into a known language.

By 1814, when the 41-year-old Young first tackled the Egyptian scripts, he had a growing reputation in both England and France as a competent and innovative – to some of his critics, overly innovative – natural philosopher. Foreign Secretary of the London Royal Society since 1802, Young had a reasonably successful, if hardly lucrative, medical practice. In retrospect we see him as one of the great natural philosophers: the first to introduce and calculate with the principles that undergird the wave theory of light, to develop a working account of bending ever since memorialized in "Young's modulus," to produce a trichromatic theory of color vision, and to develop many other results as well. Much of that reputation solidified only decades after his death. As a boy brought up in a Quaker environment he learned, and became highly competent in, not only Greek and Latin, but Arabic and Hebrew as well as French, German and Italian. And he learned as well the canons of orthography and diction that in late 18th century England governed the proper way to write and express Greek. These experiences molded Young's attitude to language and script as, in his early medical studies, he developed an empirically-based theory concerning the manner in which the human vocal apparatus forms sounds, a theory that had consequences for the implicit laws that, he conceived, might

also govern the inscription of meaningful sound by the human hand.

The signal importance of this background for the manner in which Young approached the unknown scripts of the Rosetta Stone has not previously come strikingly to the fore because a good deal of what Young wrote down in a diary seems to have disappeared a century and a half ago. But not everything did. On June 20, 1855 Young's widow, Eliza, presented what she had of his letters concerning the decipherment to the British Library. At about the same time either she, or perhaps John Leitch (1808-1880), the editor of Young's *Works* on hieroglyphs, also donated a package containing the earliest of his notes, written during the summer of 1814 when Young first came to grips with the Egyptian signs. These notes, and what lies behind them, tell a striking story, for they reveal just how Young thought about writing and language, and why he could never have admitted that either of the Rosetta scripts could be anything other than representations of words: in their forms before the Alexandrian conquest, they simply could not have signified the sounds of human expression.

In this lecture we'll examine the notes that detail Young's first efforts, and how he came to think and work with the Rosetta scripts in his distinctive manner.