

Jean François Champollion

Biography Workbook



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JEAN FRANÇOIS CHAMPOLLION
(1790-1832)

The deciphering of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics was one of the greatest achievements of the human race in the 19th century. Jean François Champollion was the man who accomplished this great feat. He is surnamed "le jeune," the younger, to distinguish him from his elder brother, Champollion Figeac, whose life was one of paternal devotion and the most unselfish sacrifice for his younger brother. Both were born in Figeac, in the south of France, François on December 23, 1790.

François made his home, however, in the beautiful little town of Grenoble, situated on the hills near the valley of the Isère. It was to this place that Champollion Figeac, who was here engaged as director of the town library, and later on as professor

of Greek at the university, drew his twelve years younger brother François. François, at the age of nine, went to live with his elder brother, filled with the proudest hopes for the future, and grateful for the care and devotion bestowed upon him.

1. What was the name of Jean François Champollion's older brother?

2. Where was Jean François Champollion born?

- a. Figeac
- b. Grenoble
- c. Paris
- d. Rouen

Match each term to its meaning. Place the letter of the definition on the corresponding line.

- 3. _____ achievement
- 4. _____ bestow
- 5. _____ decipher
- 6. _____ grateful
- 7. _____ hieroglyphics

- | |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">a) A great or heroic deedb) Form of writing that uses pictures or symbols to represent sounds or termsc) Plentifuld) Thankfule) To confer or givef) To interpret the meaning of |
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At that time, naturally, all eyes were turned toward Egypt, where the First Consul, Napoleon Bonaparte, had led the army of the Republic, accompanied by a host of celebrated men of science. The newly opened world of ancient monuments on the banks of the Nile River excited the greatest interest in everybody. But for few did it have as strong an attraction as for Champollion Figeac, who had occupied himself long previously with the study of the history and language of the ancient Egyptians.

Furthermore, he and his brother François came, so to say, into indirect contact with the great expedition. For the famous mathematician Fourier, who had gone out with it, became afterward prefect of Grenoble, and one of Figeac's warmest and most intimate friends.

8. What resident of Figeac put the Champollion brothers into indirect contact with the Napoleonic expedition in Egypt?

François, at the age of twelve, was already fully master of the classic languages. Surrounded by the rich collection of books placed in his brother's care, he had drifted into a territory which is not embraced in the

usual high school curriculum, viz., the Asian languages.

While still at school, and during his leisure hours, François mastered with wonderful energy, aided as it was by an almost phenomenal power for acquiring knowledge, the Hebrew and most other Semitic languages, as well as Sanskrit and Persian.

As, however, Egypt had the greatest attraction for him, he also studied the Coptic dialect, the language of the Egyptians during the early centuries after Christ, which was written in Greek letters with some few others added.

9. List three languages that Jean François Champollion learned as a boy.

Withal, the remarkable youth was cheerful and companionable, finding time even to practice his poetic gifts. Nor did his physical development suffer through the severe exertion of his mind.

His portrait, located in the Louvre in Paris, represents him in manhood with bronzed skin, easily allowing him to be recognized as a native of the South of France. His nose is slightly bent, his forehead lofty, his hair black and of great

Jean Francois Champollion

abundance. The dark eyes, shaded by heavy brows, express serenity—earnest and profound sincerity—while his well-formed mouth gives evidence of winning manners and the friendliness of his nature.

10. Jean François Champollion was very sickly looking due to the long hours he spent studying indoors.
- True
 - False

At the age of seventeen, Jean François Champollion submitted his first work, a geography of ancient Egypt, to the Academy of Grenoble, which, notwithstanding his extreme youth, conferred upon him the degree of associate. Soon after, he followed a course of lectures at the Oriental College of Paris.

With youthful zeal, he availed himself of the numerous educational advantages at his disposal in this great city, and gained even then the notice of the most prominent men of his profession. After two years' time, not quite twenty years of age, he was called to a position at the University of Grenoble.

11. Where did Jean François Champollion attend college lectures?
-
-

When Napoleon rested in this town on his way from Elba to Paris, in the “Hundred Days” of 1815, he appointed the elder Champollion as his private secretary.

The close relationship into which this position brought Figeac to the emperor, and his republican ideas after Napoleon's downfall—which ideas were shared by his brother François—were circumstances which, in later years, became great obstacles to their further advancement.

The Champollion brothers were looked upon as characters dangerous to the state, and were deprived of their positions. The Institute of France even withheld from François its protection.

The brothers were banished to their old homestead, Figeac, where they found leisure in abundance to complete several unfinished works. When, in 1818, through the influence of the Duke of Decazes, their banishment was pronounced at an end, François had completed his great work, *L'Égypte sous les Pharaons*.

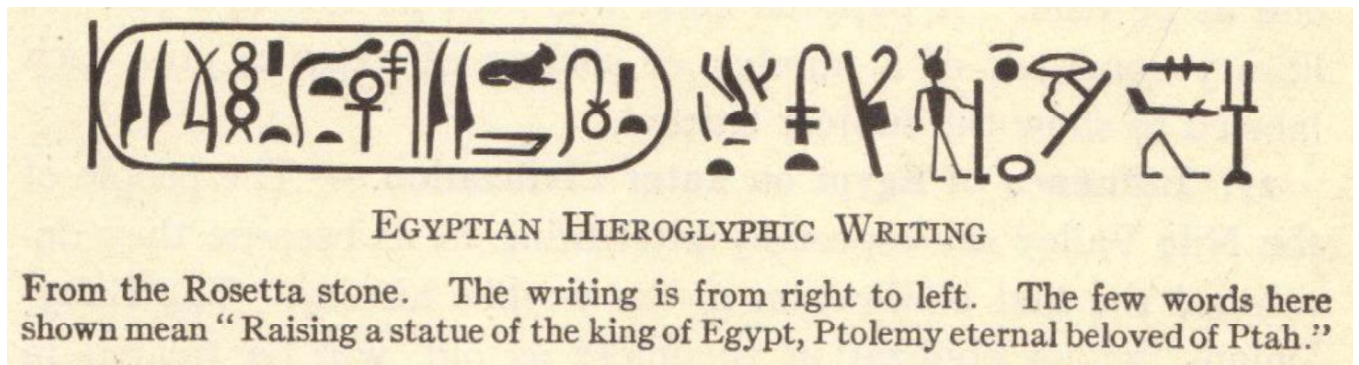
This work, of the utmost importance at the time, in the preparation of which the Coptic sources were freely drawn upon, won François his lost chair at the Grenoble University. After he had secured this post he was encouraged to found a home of his own. Rose Blanc was the bride-elect, with whom he was united

in a most happy marriage until his death.

12. Why did the Champollion brothers fall out of political favor?

13. Whom did François marry?

For many years, François had occupied himself with the monument which gave promise to the possibility of deciphering hieroglyphics.



During the French expedition in Egypt under Napoleon Bonaparte, as it happened, the talisman was found which was to become the key to disclose the mystery of the language and the written signs of the Ancient Egyptians—the tablet or the key of Rosetta, a stone-plate made of black granite. Three inscriptions, written in different signs, covered the originally rectangular surface of the tablet.

The uppermost one, considerably injured, showed the hieroglyphics, which were familiar through the obelisks and other Egyptian monuments. The second inscription was obscure, while the third and lowest inscription, which

had suffered but little injury, consisted of Greek letters clear to every philologist.

The Rosetta stone's Greek inscription proclaimed that the tablet contained a decree of the Egyptian priesthood, in honor of the fifth king of the house of the Ptolemies, and that this was written in the holy language, in that of the people of Egypt, and in Greek, on the same tablet. Here was, therefore, a somewhat extensive text in two of the three modes of writing of the Egyptians of which Clemens of Alexandria makes mention, with a Greek translation of the same.

The fortunes of war brought this extraordinary monument into the

Jean Francois Champollion

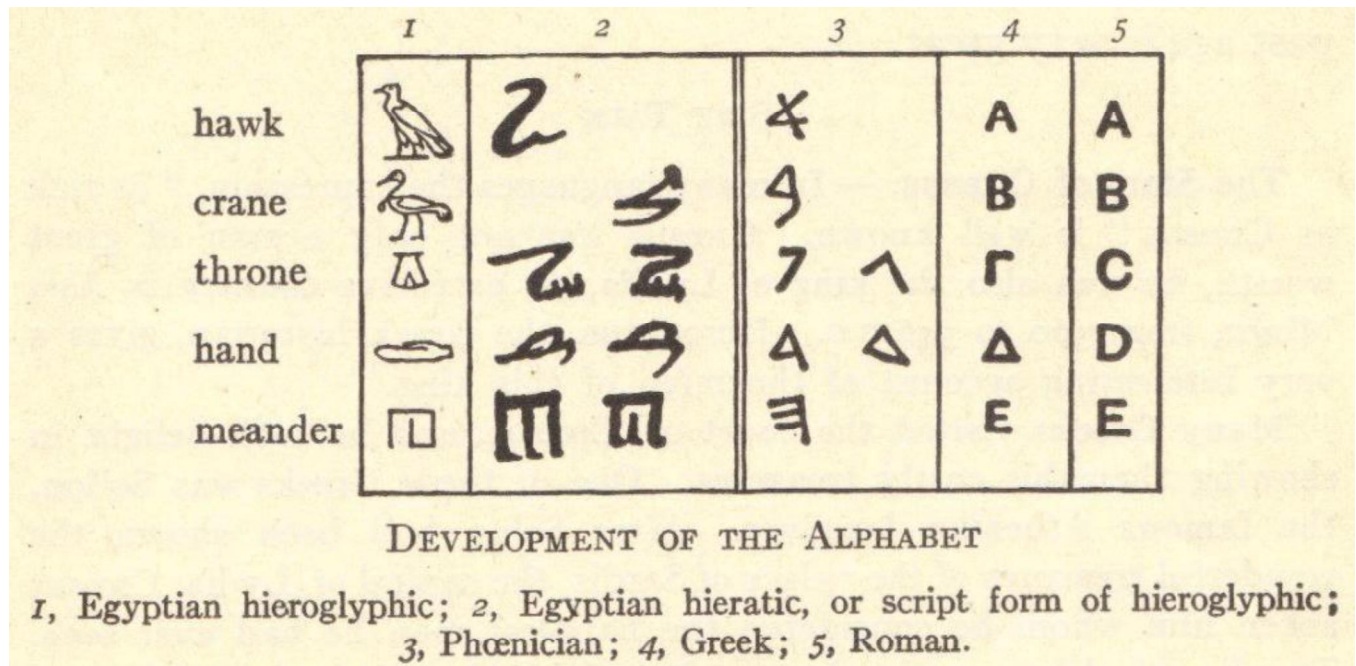
hands of the English. It was placed in the British Museum, and care was taken that copies of the three

inscriptions should reach the various Egyptologists, among them Champollion.

Match each term to its meaning. Place the letter of the definition on the corresponding line.

- 14. _____ inscription
- 15. _____ philologist
- 16. _____ talisman
- 17. _____ translation

- a) Oral dedication made to a deity in the ancient world
- b) Object with engravings which are believed to give it power over human beings
- c) Person who studies written languages
- d) Rendering of words from one language to another
- e) Written words marking an address or dedication to a person



The demotic inscription—that is to say, the text in the writing of the people, was one of the most inviting to decipher, because the signs composing it seemed to be letters representing sound. This was sedulously attempted by several scientists, and with the best

results by the great French Orientalist, De Sacy, and by the Swede, Akerblad.

But though the former by a mechanical method recognized correctly the meaning of several groups, and though Akerblad had even

ascertained most of the signs of the demotic alphabet, still they were both incapable of discerning the elements of which the demotic writing is composed.

18. sedulously:
- a. assiduously
 - b. hastily
 - c. reluctantly
 - d. sardonically

The great English physician and naturalist, Thomas Young, who also occupied himself with the three various texts, made better progress. Taking advantage and making use of the parts that had been revealed to him by demotic and hieroglyphic text, he succeeded, in a mechanical way, and by intelligent comparisons in deciphering the names Ptolemaios and Berenike, and in recognizing even the hieroglyphic signs for numbers.

Still, the true nature of the Egyptian writing was not revealed to Young, either. In their particulars, his ascertainments are untrue, for in the names he had in no way discovered the alphabetic signs of which they were composed.

As to the remainder of the inscription, Young thought that it consisted of such drawn signs or forms with symbolical significance as might be found interpreted in the *Hieroglyphica of Horapollon*.

19. What two names were deciphered by Thomas Young?

That those groups of hieroglyphics surrounded by a frame (cartouche) are the names of kings, had been contended long before by the Dane Zoëge, Barthélemy, and others. The framed hieroglyphics on the tablet of Rosetta could, as the Greek text taught, signify only the name of Ptolemaios.

Champollion also had originally held the same erroneous opinion as Young and his predecessors. Though he succeeded in defining several groups of characters of the people's writing, like Akerblad, by comparison, he, even as late as 1821, in his essay on hieroglyphics, entitled "De l'Écriture hiératique des Anciens Égyptiens," declares them to be symbolical signs and figures.

But Champollion knew of Young's successful comparisons with Greek names. When Mr. Bankes brought a small obelisk to England from the island of Philæ, on which the framed group of hieroglyphics was bound to contain the names of Ptolemaios and Cleopatra, because a Greek inscription at the foot of the obelisk mentioned these royal names, a firm starting point was created by

Champollion. From this starting point, he was to succeed in removing the mass of obstacles which had stood in the way of all previous explorations and researches.

Champollion made his basis the supposition that the framed names were constructed of alphabetic signs. The name Ptolemaios was known through the tablet of Rosetta. If the second name on Bankes's obelisk were Cleopatra, a comparison of the two names should confirm this. The first letter in the name Ptolemaios being a "p" it should occur as fifth letter in Cleopatra. And this was actually the case. The third letter in Ptolemaios, the "o," was found again as the fourth one in Cleopatra. The fourth sign in Ptolemaios, "l," a lion, occurred correctly as the second one in Cleopatra. By further comparison every sign was correctly found, and when Champollion had deciphered a group of signs which he took to be Alexander, and again found every letter in its right place, he could assure himself that hieroglyphics also were based on the phonetic system.

20. How did Champollion learn that ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics are based on a phonetic system?

He soon, with the aid of the letters discovered in the above-mentioned groups, deciphered other well-known names of kings. In this way, he acquired a knowledge of the whole hieroglyphic alphabet. But the many hundred forms and signs, of which the holy scriptures of the Egyptians are composed, could not well be of an altogether alphabetic nature, and a further study of the subject brought the explorer to the conclusion that ideographs were interspersed among the alphabetical signs in order to make the alphabetic words more comprehensive.

For instance, after a masculine proper name the picture of a man was drawn. After every word connected with the motion of walking, the picture of two pacing legs was placed. Besides this, Champollion found that some sounds could be represented by different hieroglyphics. With this, the most important elements of hieroglyphics were disclosed, and it was all accomplished in one year, from 1821-22.

When François, after a period of extraordinary mental exertion, appeared before his brother one morning with all the proofs in his hands, calling to him, "Je tiens l'affaire; vois!" (I have found it; look

here!) he fell to the floor fainting, worn out by the immense exertions of the last few months.

21. Why does hieroglyphic writing include ideographs interspersed among alphabetical signs?

It required some time for Champollion to recover his health. But Figeac read, on September 17, 1822, his brother's pamphlet at the Academy in Paris. It appeared under the name of "Lettre à M. Dacier," and contained the details of his discovery.

That day decided Champollion's future career. As early as the year following, he published his new work, *Précis du système hiéroglyphique*, after which Louis Philippe of Orleans had the discovery officially announced before the Oriental Association. Louis XVIII made it his royal duty to lighten Champollion's future work.

The *Précis* embraces the foregoing results of his discovery. Considering the short space of time in which all this was accomplished, it appears marvelous that François could thus early determine the most important elements of the hieroglyphic

system in their minute details so correctly. In 1824, the king sent him to Italy, where he profited principally by the splendid collection of Egyptian antiquities in Turin. In 1826, Charles X appointed him director of the Egyptian Museum in the Louvre, which Champollion founded by purchasing at Livorno the celebrated "Salt Collection."

22. Who appointed Champollion director of the Egyptian Museum at the Louvre?

Soon after Champollion's return to France, the king sent him on a mission to Egypt. There he remained from August, 1828, till the end of 1829. The Italian Rosellini joined him on the Nile.

Champollion's "Lettres écrites d'Égypte et de la Nubie" render his observations and impressions and describe his life and adventures in Egypt, in a most entertaining and instructive style. The many and various inscriptions, copied there by him, are all quoted in his great work on monuments, entitled, *Monuments de l'Égypte et de la Nubie*, and in his posthumous work, *Notices descriptives conformes aux manuscrits autographes rédigés sur les lieux*.

23. posthumous:
- a. arising or occurring after the creator's death
 - b. incomplete
 - c. previous
 - d. thoughtful in a humorous, lighthearted manner

Soon after Champollion's return to Paris (in March, 1830), by which time his health had commenced to fail, he was elected a Member of the Academy. In March, 1831, he was appointed professor at the College de France. The solidity and instructiveness of his lectures brought the most celebrated leaders in science to hear him. But there were destined to be but few of the lectures, as he all too soon felt himself too weak to continue them. On March 4, 1832, at his old homestead Figeac, a stroke of apoplexy ended his active life of achievement.

Champollion's great discovery was at first vigorously attacked. Erring minds declaring the system of the great Frenchman to be wrong, and submitting others of their own, as the Russian Klaproth and the German Seyffarth, disturbed Champollion's peace. Still more bitterly, however, was he pursued by the envy and hatred of his political opponents.

Even when the laurel already decorated his brow, they saw to it that

the thorns were not wanting in the wreath.

Especially in England, various efforts were made to have, not him, but Thomas Young, recognized as the discoverer of the science of deciphering hieroglyphics. But though Young had succeeded previously to Champollion in deciphering some hieroglyphic names in a mechanical way, yet the genial Englishman mistook, during the whole course of his activity, the real character of hieroglyphic writing.

To Champollion, on the other hand, it was left to recognize their nature and construction, so that science must acknowledge him to be the discoverer of the true nature of the system of hieroglyphic writing.

Shortly before Champollion's death, it was vouchsafed him to proclaim to his loyal brother, "Voici ma carte pour la postérité," pointing to the manuscript of his *Egyptian Grammar*, of which the last chapter was still missing. It contains the germs from which all similar works have sprung, which since have perfected and enlarged that of Champollion. It showed the path in which all subsequent grammarians were to walk. The results of Young's discoveries remain without influence upon the progress of the science, and have found a place long since among old relics.

24. What motivated so many people to deny the importance and preeminence of Champollion's achievements in Egyptology?

François Champollion's work is the seed, which even at the present day brings forth the richest fruits. When he died, at the age of forty-two, he left the world not only his *Egyptian Grammar*, but also pioneer works in other branches of his science.

His *Panthéon Égyptien* (1823-25) dealt with Egyptian mythology. His excellent knowledge of Coptic is clearly seen in many of his works. His *Egyptian Dictionary of Hieroglyphics* (1841-44) is, bearing in mind the time when it was written, a work of marvelous accomplishment.

This dictionary, with several other works and manuscripts of his literary estate, which the French Government had purchased for the sum of fifty thousand francs, were faithfully and lovingly edited and published after his death by his elder brother, Figeac. These posthumous works bear witness not only to the overwhelming industry of this great worker and explorer, but also to the

loving unselfishness of his brother, who sacrificed a great part of his time and activity in editing and arranging the manuscripts of the departed. The *Grammar*, the *Monuments*, the *Dictionary*, were all published by Figeac.

At Père Lachaise Cemetery, in Paris, a weather-beaten obelisk and a broken stone tablet indicate the spot where the remains of François Champollion rest.

A monument which was erected in Champollion's honor at his native town, Figeac, bears the well-chosen inscription which so frequently occurs among the titles of the Pharaohs in hieroglyphics, *anch zete*, i.e., *everlasting*.

A beautiful sentence, which Chateaubriand addressed to the faithful brother and co-worker of the great researcher, is also inscribed on the statue of François Champollion, le jeune. It reads: "Ses admirables travaux auront la durée des monuments qu'il nous a fait connaître." ("His admirable works will last as long as the monuments which he has taught us to understand.")

25. What aspects of Champollion's life do you find most impressive and inspirational, and why? Explain your answer.

Word Search Puzzle

I B A B P F T X C V F C Z S P Y U B T P V F Z M N
T D S N D T C X C U H F C N E V G O Z H V I W E K
N Z E F C O O I U A T I H O R M P O N I V G S U S
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M K G T G E E P E P F N Z T E H C L E O P A T R A
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M P T I L O X L H L G I L P A U X P L Y W X M G G
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R O S E T T A S T O N E A L P H A B E T U V S E B
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achievement
alphabet
ancient Egypt
Champollion
Cleopatra
Coptic
decipher
Egyptology
expedition
Figeac
Greek

hieroglyphics
ideograph
intellect
monument
Napoleon
perseverance
philology
phonetic
Ptolemy
Rosetta stone
translate