

## **The Rosetta Stone and the rebirth of Ancient Egypt by John Ray**

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There are numerous books on the Rosetta Stone and its decipherment, so I was hoping this was going to be something a little different. Whilst not necessarily presenting any particularly new information it was written in an interesting and engaging way. The Introduction and the first chapter were a background to the Rosetta Stone; what it is, where it was found and the importance of this monument in the modern world. Then there was an interesting history on the early attempts at decipherment introducing us to little known Arab scholars and the fabulously named Johannes Kinckius, pointing out that many of them, although not deciphering the language itself, had highlighted key points which were to lead to decipherment in the nineteenth century.

Ray then discusses the history of Napoleon in Egypt, and the British/French rivalry in all things, which is also prevalent in the story of decipherment. There is a chapter dedicated each to both Young and Champollion, which were intriguing. Young for example was a fascinating and brilliant man, who not only made the first steps in decipherment of hieroglyphs but can also be said to have deciphered the much more complex demotic language, using the Rosetta Stone as a starting point, for which he is never given credit. His achievements in other areas are also exceptional, including identifying how the eye perceives colours and he even created a primitive light-bulb! The life and character of Champollion is also described, including his treason charge, support of Napoleon and his genius when it came to languages. It is interesting to note that Young and Champollion corresponded and Young whilst not accusing him of plagiarism, did feel his work was the key to Champollion's enlightenment and felt it was not acknowledged. However, although he is well known as the decipherer of hieroglyphs Champollion was also the holder of the first chair of Egyptology in the world, and can be said to be the founder of Egyptology as a discipline.

Chapter 5 I found particularly interesting, as Ray explained the complexities of hieroglyphics in the simplest terms, and although I can read hieroglyphs I found some of his analogies useful, and feel that for someone unable to read the language they would finish this chapter with an understanding of the writing system and the method used by Champollion in deciphering it.

Chapter 7 explained what the work of Champollion has enabled Egyptologists to do giving a list of famous Egyptologists and the texts which have been insightful to the lives of the ancient Egyptians. This and the previous chapter seem to be a concise history of Egyptology with a tenuous link to Champollion, that being "Without hieroglyphs we couldn't have achieved this". Reference to the texts that Champollion translated himself would, I felt, have been more insightful to the history of the Rosetta Stone rather than such texts discovered 70 years after his death. However the point was well made.

The final chapter was an interesting discussion on the repatriation of antiquities using the Rosetta Stone as a starting and end point, whilst using lots of other examples to illustrate his argument. Ray explained well that deciding on 'ownership' is not as simple as is often presented, with many people making a claim of ownership on different grounds, and that such arguments are often used for political rather than cultural means. Ray presents a good argument looking at the pros and cons of the debate.

The text of the stone is discussed in chapter 8, in the wider context of Ptolemaic Egypt at the time it was written. It is interesting to note that Ptolemy V who created such an important document was in fact a 14 year old puppet king who was being conned by the priesthood. Yet another king like Tutankhamun who was insignificant at the time but has become infamous due to a fluke of archaeology. As an Appendix the text of the stone is given in full, for reference as well as a further reading section.

One slight niggle was the occasional reference made by Ray about the stone as if it was a sentient being such as "the Rosetta Stone had made up its mind to be deciphered by a Frenchman", and "learning French was perhaps the best thing the stone ever did" with no real explanation for the comment. Such romanticism I feel has little room in such a well-written scholarly work.