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INTRODUCTION

One day in the early 1820s, a traveler to London stopped at the Antiquities Gallery of the British Museum, noting that it was “the only institution in London which does not charge you for entry.” Apparently even the nonexistent fee was not low enough, for the traveler soon found much to dislike about the antiquities on display. The “pillars of ancient temples, tombstones with inscriptions, and damaged statues” inspired a dejected identification. Just as he, a foreigner, felt alienated by the city, so too did these objects “lose their meaning in the modern capital of a strange country.” He rallied, however, on seeing “the stone brought from Rosetta,” with inscriptions in “the supposedly secret hieroglyphs” as well as in Greek and demotic. The latter two inscriptions prompted him to wonder “whether they were known to the researcher Champollion,” as “they could contribute to his claim about the hieroglyphs, which have so far been considered a mystery and in his opinion are only letters.”¹ That the Rosetta Stone, with its triple inscription, should rouse this melancholy witness to speculate about the relationship between the three scripts attests to the broad interest that the recent work of both Jean-François Champollion in France and Thomas Young in England was beginning to elicit at this time.

Champollion and Young are often said to have worked in broadly similar ways in their efforts to “decipher” these scripts.² The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “to decipher” as “to convert (a text written in code, or a coded signal) into normal language.” Both Champollion and Young did aim to read Egyptian texts, and the dictionary meaning of “decipherment” does include at least that much. But it also suggests that a script constitutes a “code,” that is, “a system of words, letters, figures, or symbols used to represent others, especially for the purpose of secrecy,” again according to the Oxford definition. Until well into the eighteenth century, and even later, those interested in Egyptian hieroglyphs did for the most part think of them as a “code” in the sense of a system of inscription designed to ensure secrecy. Each hieroglyphic, it was frequently thought, stood for an elaborate allegory in which sacred knowledge was concealed, knowledge that was thought to be the exclusive possession of priests.³

Neither Young nor Champollion subscribed to this interpretation. For Young in part, and for Champollion altogether, all three Egyptian scripts were

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intended to convey specific words and word phrases, which meant that the ancient texts could be understood by anyone who knew the Egyptian language. The purpose of many codes or ciphers—to maintain secrecy—was for them not at issue, except insofar as literacy itself had been limited to a select group for such a purpose. (Neither Young nor Champollion took much interest in the extent to which ancient Egyptians were literate.) To write of their work as a “decipherment” in the customary sense, though having the virtue of long-established usage, can obscure much of what Champollion considered his own aims to be. For his part, Young did see his efforts rather like the cracking of a cipher, but he also found the signs used by the Egyptians redolent of their religion, which he disdained. He insisted that, in the centuries before Alexander’s conquest of Egypt, hieroglyphs always encompassed much more than the direct words and phrases of the ancient language, and what they did convey then was hardly precise. As Young noted in a remarkable letter written in 1827, although a “simple picture, for instance, of a votary presenting a vase to a sitting deity; each characterized by some peculiarity of form, and each distinguished also by a name written over him” might “be called a pure hieroglyphical representation,” such a picture “scarcely amounts to a language, any more than the look of love is the language of the lover.”⁴ To Champollion, in contrast, the scripts were traces of the language of a venerable ancient civilization. Where for Young ancient Egypt held little interest in periods before the Greek invasion, for Champollion the Greco-Roman period marked the cultural decline of a once admirable civilization under foreign domination.

As our remarks already suggest, this book is a study in contrasts. The differences in the approaches of Young and Champollion to Egyptian writing evolved from their dissimilar circumstances, with different attitudes toward antiquity, different material cultures of printing and engraving, different ways of handling evidence, and more. Although we examine the details of the controversy that emerged following Champollion’s 1822 announcement of his claims at the Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres—the renowned *Lettre à M. Dacier*—our account begins much earlier. We concentrate on how each of our protagonists arrived at his conclusions in order to show the separate developmental arcs of their ideas. To this end, we have made extensive use of archival materials not previously thoroughly exploited: in particular, Young’s manuscripts from 1814, when he first turned to the Egyptian scripts, Champollion’s drafts for talks that he gave at the Académie des inscriptions before the famed Dacier letter, and manuscripts that document Champollion’s passionate engagement with Coptic. All in all, Young could not take a view of the Egyptian scripts that was not also a position on the sophistication of the ancient civilization relative to his contemporary values; whereas for Champollion, the

study of the ancient scripts provided much-needed *escape* from the present, especially during periods of personal difficulty. “What a distraction, indeed, for the heart and soul is a grammar that is more than six thousand years old!” Champollion wrote to a friend in May 1816, in the midst of internal exile to his sleepy hometown of Figeac.⁵ To Young, Egyptian culture itself seemed principally responsible for the character of Egyptian writing, which he considered vastly inferior to Greek. For Champollion, in contrast, the scripts held out the hope of entry into a world that he wanted deeply to understand, about which he made few a priori claims. As a result, he moved fruitfully along paths that Young would not, and perhaps could not, follow.

Late Georgian attitudes shaped Young’s work with the Egyptian scripts. Propriety in language, deportment, and written expression mattered a good deal to Young, as did contemporary expectations concerning the proper forms of mathematical reasoning. For Young, these expectations went considerably beyond mathematics itself. Born to a Quaker family and encouraged to value mastery of Greek and Latin, Young became expert at manipulating the written forms of both. An avid reader of natural philosophy and mathematics treatises, he mastered these skills as well. As a young man, he found favor with Georgian elites who valued ancient languages as much as he did, and who were rapidly coming to value scientific expertise. Young’s path into London society was additionally smoothed by his mother’s uncle, the prominent London physician Richard Brocklesby, who shepherded Young through his early medical career while welcoming him into his circle of influential friends.

Although Young came to eschew Quaker dress and practice, residues of his religious upbringing can be detected in his later attitudes. The zoomorphic idolatry he perceived as the foundation for ancient Egyptian religion rendered the entire culture suspect. This, too, shaped his attitude toward Egyptian writing. In the end, for Thomas Young the scripts of Egypt were uninteresting for anything they might have to say about a culture he viewed as barbarous, until the salutary effects of Greek culture changed the scripts in ways that he hoped might be used to illuminate the histories of the invading Greeks and Romans. Disdain for ancient Egypt strongly colored his attitude toward its writing, and the scripts interested him chiefly as a particularly resistant puzzle to solve.

Young’s attitude was not unusual. Many of his contemporaries regarded ancient Egypt as useful only insofar as it illuminated the condition of the modern Briton. We see this attitude vividly expressed in Turner’s early paintings on biblical subjects. One of these paintings referenced the familiar story of ancient and idolatrous civilization getting its divine comeuppance at the hands of a virtuous prophet.⁶ Exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1800, J.M.W. Turner’s *The Fifth Plague of Egypt* featured a desert landscape in which threatening



FIGURE 1.1. J.M.W. Turner, *The Fifth Plague of Egypt* (1800). Courtesy of Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields.

clouds are pierced by a shaft of light that illuminates an inscrutable pyramid (fig. 1.1). An instantly recognizable symbol of ancient (i.e., biblical) Egypt, the pyramid revealed nothing of its meaning or relationship to the landscape it dominated, while animals and human figures are shown prostrate in the foreground, suffering the divinely meted-out consequences of their idolatry. Such interpretations condensed religious and antiquarian themes into an easily consumable narrative of social order—who was in, who was out, and who was responsible for the present situation. As a symbol, Egypt gave form to otherwise inchoate anxieties about heritage, identity, and belonging. These anxieties were stoked not by Egypt per se but by events closer to home, such as the difficult incorporation of territories like Scotland into the body of Great Britain and the intrusion of scientific expertise into antiquarian-adjacent fields like archaeology and philology. As we will see, Young took care to distance himself from antiquarianism. But even his wariness suggested the degree to which he shared in these broader conflicts.

Born seventeen years after Young in 1790, Champollion was the youngest son in a large family headed by a domineering father, a bookseller with a taste for drink and a willingness to incur ruinous debts. Despite these unfavorable beginnings, Champollion was supported in his studies from a tender age. In perhaps the luckiest turn of his young life, Champollion's practical and worldly

older brother took charge of his education. While employed by a Grenoble textile concern owned by a member of their extended family, Jacques-Joseph (known later as Champollion-Figeac) encouraged Champollion to develop his affinity for languages, notably Hebrew, as well as the usual Latin and Greek. But quiet scholarship apart from public life ultimately held limited appeal. A fiery Bonapartist during his early adulthood, Champollion narrowly avoided incarceration and worse during the Bourbon Restoration. In keeping with his Bonapartism, he exhibited a philosophe-like disdain for official religion; at the same time, he nurtured a distinctly un-philosophe-like admiration for the culture, as he then knew it, of ancient Egypt. Napoleon, of course, undertook a massive expedition to the country, largely in order to secure his bid to be remembered as an empire builder in the manner of Alexander the Great. For Champollion the appeal was different. He regarded pre-Alexandrian Egypt as aesthetically and even morally superior to what it became under Greco-Roman domination. To read the ancient scripts was to open a window onto an attractive world peopled by individuals whose lives he admired and whose beliefs he respected.

Guiding his younger brother's education, Champollion-Figeac encouraged Champollion to value some kinds of evidence over others. A librarian and scholar eventually selected to head the newly established *École des chartes*, Champollion-Figeac merged old-fashioned antiquarianism with the nascent sciences of archaeology and philology.⁷ The result was a distinctive historical sensibility, one he shared with contemporaries who were, like him, keen to modernize French antiquarianism. Historians have noted the fingerprints Champollion-Figeac left on his younger brother's career, as he shepherded Champollion through the treacherous world of elite Parisian scholars and edited the younger man's writings in order to limit otherwise inevitable criticism and dismissal. From his older brother Champollion absorbed much about the nature and practice of history that prepared him for work on the Egyptian scripts. Among other things, Champollion-Figeac alerted him to the possibility that textual evidence could be scrutinized for uniquely persistent features such as linguistic roots and toponyms that described inalterable features of the landscape.

As we will see, the question of whether the Egyptian scripts were phonetic became central to Champollion's work in contradictory ways. The question was then a matter of considerable general import, for the advent of an alphabet was indexed to the presumed sophistication of a civilization. Though not everyone agreed on this point, Coptic—the liturgical language of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt—was hypothesized to be a late descendant of the spoken language of ancient Egypt.⁸ However, since Young saw Coptic as a

developed language of late pre-Islamic Egypt, he was skeptical of its utility for investigations of pre-Alexandrian texts. For Champollion, on the other hand, Coptic virtually *was* ancient Egyptian, little changed from the original. As a student in Paris, he became involved with Copts recently arrived from Napoleon's Egyptian expedition who introduced him to Coptic as a living language. Champollion found in Coptic something like a fossil from remote antiquity, one that accordingly promised unique access to the country's earliest beliefs and cultural practices. The question, for him, was how Coptic could be used to elucidate the scripts. Assembling dictionaries of Coptic, Champollion even tested hypotheses about which bits of the Rosetta demotic might correspond in some manner to various Coptic roots. By the early 1820s, following a stunning reversal, Champollion became convinced that even the most ancient of the scripts had to be phonetic. In what follows, we trace Champollion's path to this conclusion.

When Young began to engage with Egyptian writing in 1814, he was an established medical doctor known for his pathbreaking and occasionally controversial natural philosophical investigations. At forty-one years old, he could boast a respectable scientific reputation even among the French savants, as scholars in natural philosophy, mathematics, and other areas were called, and this despite the acrimonious years of the Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Champollion, in contrast, was just twenty-four in 1814 and scarcely known outside a select group in Paris and Grenoble; his first book, *L'Égypte sous les Pharaons (Egypt under the Pharaohs)*, was published that year after a great buildup to disappointingly mixed reviews. Unlike Young, he was uninterested in mathematics and natural philosophy, though the corpus of his published and unpublished work amply attests to his powerful ability to classify and synthesize a vast array of heterogeneous evidence. Their temperaments also differed. Until pressed by friends to counter what they saw as an emerging attempt to devalue his work on the scripts in comparison with Champollion's, Young remained, if anything, both cordial and helpful when contacted by the young Frenchman. Even the book that he produced to assert his priority in particular points was politely and carefully framed. Champollion, on the other hand, reacted vehemently to insinuations that he had merely amplified Young's positions.

The seemingly trivial matter of nomenclature emblemizes the difference between the two men, who could not even agree on what to call the intermediate Rosetta script. Young used "enchorial," a straight transliteration of the Rosetta Greek ΕΓΧΩΡΙΟΙΣ, which he took to refer simply to the vernacular "of the country." The choice was consistent with his view that the inscription's translation should adhere closely to the Greek text in both structure and mean-

ing. Champollion, following Herodotus, preferred “Demotic,” which could be construed as referring to the popular, idiomatic language spoken by the general populace and captured in the Rosetta Egyptian. Words carry a variety of meanings and connotations, and in the difference between “enchorial” and “Demotic,” we spy more than an argument over scholarly possession, though it was at least that. Despite his Quaker background, Young was by training, inclination, and position hardly prone to see a reflection of Egyptian popular culture in the Rosetta inscription. The manifestly republican Champollion held a viewpoint that was altogether different. The lexical discontinuity functioned, and continues to function, as a reminder of the stark differences in the two mens’ political attitudes and suggests relationships between those attitudes and their views of ancient Egypt.⁹

These differences are perhaps most apparent at the juncture where their public lives intersected with their intellectual preoccupations. Champollion’s views on the nature of the scripts were matched and occasionally echoed by his political radicalism. Although Champollion’s reputation as a radical did not redound to his professional benefit, outspokenness continually secured the benefits of an audience for his views. Young, in contrast, generally sought to avoid controversy, as it threatened the medical practice that provided his livelihood.¹⁰ Such reserve could not have been more foreign to Champollion. Though his career suffered, he freely expressed anticlerical and anti-Bourbon views, counting on his brother’s diplomatic talents and extensive connections to keep him from serious harm. Little wonder, then, that his and Young’s paths to understanding the ancient scripts differed so markedly.

Despite their differences, Young and Champollion did share important traits. Both had an acute ability to work with unfamiliar graphical forms, that is, the Egyptian scripts themselves. Both were exceptionally able to organize these forms systematically—to such an extent, in Champollion’s case, that he would be criticized for embodying the eighteenth-century grand sin of having been too committed to “system” and not enough to available evidence. To some extent, Young and Champollion also shared a literary tradition. Both absorbed eighteenth-century travelers’ accounts of Egypt as well as works by predecessors who attempted to read the scripts. They knew as well the principal accounts from antiquity, those of Horapollo, Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, and Clement of Alexandria, together with what had been written about these ancient remarks during the previous century. Both would grapple with the complexities posed by contemporary efforts to reproduce the signs on the mummy wrappings, papyri, and carved inscriptions.¹¹ Of course, much of what they held in common they also shared with their less well-known contemporaries, and their social and intellectual contexts were hardly mutually

exclusive. People, publications, and letters flowed back and forth as freely as circumstances allowed.

We have divided our account into five major parts. Part 1, “A Quaker’s Odyssey,” begins nearly in medias res, with a dinner party thrown in 1803 by publisher Thomas Longman at which Young confronted attitudes toward ancient history and language, which soon pervaded his work on Egyptian writing. The rest of part 1 traces aspects of Young’s early biography that were instrumental to his later work on the scripts, concluding with his first mature encounter with a physical remnant of antique writing, significantly in the form not of Egyptian hieroglyphs but the Greek of a Herculaneum papyrus. Part 2, “Antiquity Embraced,” turns to Champollion’s early investigations of Coptic, placing them within the history of European encounters with the language and contemporary responses to the Rosetta Stone’s discovery. In part 3, “Scripts and Bones,” we examine Young’s earliest, and enduring, work on the Rosetta scripts, done during his sojourn at Worthing in the summer of 1814. Preserved at the British Library, the manuscript of that work permits us to follow the evolution of Young’s ideas as he grappled with the unfamiliar signs. Young’s subsequent studies of papyri published in the *Description de l’Égypte* cemented his views of the scripts in ways that did not significantly alter thereafter. At roughly the same time, Champollion and his brother undertook an investigation of the Roman settlement of Uxellodunum. Begun during the brothers’ forced exile to the family home at Figeac, the Uxellodunum study places Champollion’s labor on the scripts at the intersection of ancient history, antiquarianism, and philology.

After leaving Figeac for Grenoble, Champollion developed the startling claim that none of the Egyptian scripts were phonetic at all. When he finally returned to Paris, he detailed those conclusions in unpublished lectures given at the Académie des inscriptions, manuscript drafts of which are preserved in the Paris archives. In his *Lettre à M. Dacier*, presented only months later in the same venue and in the presence of Young himself, Champollion offered a considerably different assertion. How and why Champollion’s views abruptly changed is the subject of part 4, “Reading the Past.” In part 5, “Antique Letters,” we examine the earliest reactions to the Dacier letter; the reasons for the church’s otherwise surprising embrace of Champollion, the anticlerical firebrand; the beginnings of the priority controversy; and Champollion’s efforts to clarify his system and defend its novelty. In conclusion we briefly follow Champollion’s later career and assessments of the Egyptian scripts and language, published posthumously by Champollion-Figeac, who carefully tended and sometimes burnished his brother’s reputation. We do not further explore the subsequent development of Egyptology into an organized academic discipline, since that is in itself a complex story.¹²

Our account is not intended to introduce readers to modern apprehension of the Egyptian scripts. Some readers may be disappointed that we do not point out where or in what ways the views of Young and Champollion differ from the present dispensation, but this book is not an exploration of modern Egyptology. In order to illuminate how an English polymath and a linguistically talented Frenchman came to their respective views, we have tried as much as possible to remain within their perspectives, attentive to what they themselves would have known and to how their views interacted with their social and cultural contexts. Of course, the present understanding did evolve out of the original work by our protagonists, and it is hardly uninteresting to see where Young's or Champollion's views diverge from present knowledge. However, to do so here inevitably risks casting an illusory light on what they actually knew and thought. It is altogether too easy to hand out marks for which of them first correctly understood this or that sign or sign sequence, but no one at the time had the benefit of two centuries' further investigation. Those who are curious about such matters can consult the many modern texts that provide Egyptian sign sounds, meanings, and grammar for comparison, if they like, with those of Young and Champollion.

Much has been made of the conflict between Young and Champollion, and between their several epigones. These accounts frequently have nationalist overtones. The two men had their differences, to be sure, but histories of their work on the scripts only took virulently nationalist forms following both of their deaths. Despite some exceptions, their conflict did not pertain principally to the military and political struggle between England and France.¹³ Their concerns were narrower and more local. Exploring these interests while remaining faithful to their different points of view has constituted the bulk of our task in this book. Questions about priority can too easily mislead if the goal is to understand how each of our protagonists worked in his particular context, for the two had always kept quite different aims in mind.

We are, of course, acutely aware of the risks of adding yet another volume to the already extensive literature on the reading of the ancient Egyptian scripts. However, no published account has made full use of unpublished manuscript sources, and this alone provides sufficient reason for a fresh treatment. With this volume, we hope to strike a balance between an intimate exploration of our protagonists' different points of view and a presentation of the major turning points in the history of their conflict. Perhaps unsurprisingly for a work stemming from unavoidably biographical premises, character quickly became a central preoccupation. Stories need characters to unfold their plots, and we had both characters and plots in abundance. But even as they were surrounded by conflict and occasional deceitfulness, our protagonists lived and worked

within networks of helpful others, many of them largely forgotten, who also crowd our canvas. These friends and collaborators prompted and consoled, delivered hard-to-find books and rare manuscripts, and freely opened their homes, their larders, and even their wallets when the need arose. These essential figures provide the context within which our two central figures played out a drama that was at once something more, and something quite other, than a contentious meeting of minds. We have explored the lives of Champollion and Young in order to see what happened when their separate stories intersected, to join in remarkably revealing ways.

The Young archive at the British Library in London and the Champollion fonds at the Archives nationales open a new window onto their decipherments. Young's treatment of the Rosetta scripts illustrates how Georgian beliefs concerning propriety in language, writing, and even mathematics combined with belittlement of ancient Egypt's religion and culture to pattern his approach. We follow Young as he disassembled the Rosetta inscriptions, seeking to reconstruct the meaning of words written by a people he saw as inferior to the Greeks and Romans. Champollion's intense engagement with Coptic coalesced with his early admiration of ancient Egypt to lead him in an entirely different direction as he sought to uncover a lost world through its language. Unlike his English counterpart, who, though a Quaker by birth and training, nevertheless joined the social and cultural world of metropolitan London, Champollion was ever the provincial outsider, buffeted by the currents of late Napoleonic and early Restoration France. Young avoided notoriety; Champollion courted it. His archives reveal him to have been comparably bold in his willingness to change his mind about the nature of the ancient scripts as he sought a way to make a novel impact. Young, in contrast, never markedly altered his views. And yet, different though the two were, both were riveted by the struggle to find meaning in the signs of ancient Egypt.

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