

The Rosetta Stone

The Key to Ancient Egypt



A painting by Jean-Léon Gérôme [Public domain]

This painting by Jean-Léon Gérôme is called
“Bonaparte Before the Sphinx”

Pierre-François Bouchard was an engineer in the French army. He joined the army in 1794 when he was 22 years old. The following year, he went to college to study math and science. He was a very talented student and worked on scientific experiments. But he was pulled out of school to join a special force in the French army. He was sent to Egypt.

Pierre-François shipped out of France in 1798, less than a month after he got married. It wasn't easy leaving his new wife, but Pierre-François was eager to explore Egypt.

You might wonder what the French army was doing in Egypt in 1798. A general named Napoleon Bonaparte led France at this time. His army conquered many parts of Europe and Africa. This included Egypt.

The Rosetta Stone

This wasn't the first time Egypt was conquered by a foreign power. The Greeks, led by Alexander the Great, conquered Egypt nearly 2,000 years earlier. The Greeks couldn't read Egyptian hieroglyphics or speak Egyptian. This caused some problems between locals and their Greek rulers, as you can imagine.

Egyptian hieroglyphics are a special form of writing. Hieroglyphics use simple pictures called glyphs. The glyphs stand for different words. In order to read hieroglyphics, you must know the meaning of each glyph. The writing you are reading right now uses letters to form words. The letters come from an alphabet and each one makes a sound. You can put different letters together to form the sounds of the words we speak. The Greeks used a writing system with an alphabet, too.



Egyptian hieroglyphics appear at the top of the picture

Greek rulers began to lose control over parts of Egypt about a hundred years after they first arrived. To lay down the law, one Greek ruler had the laws posted in important towns. Back then, they didn't just pin up posters. They wrote important laws and other decrees in stone. But in order to

The Rosetta Stone

make sure everyone—both Greek and Egyptian alike—understood his laws, the laws were written both in Greek and in Egyptian hieroglyphics.

Over the next 2,000 years, different countries would fight to rule Egypt. A lot can be forgotten over the course of 2,000 years. Even the Egyptians eventually forgot how to read hieroglyphics. Soon, the meaning of Egyptian hieroglyphics became a mystery lost to the ages.

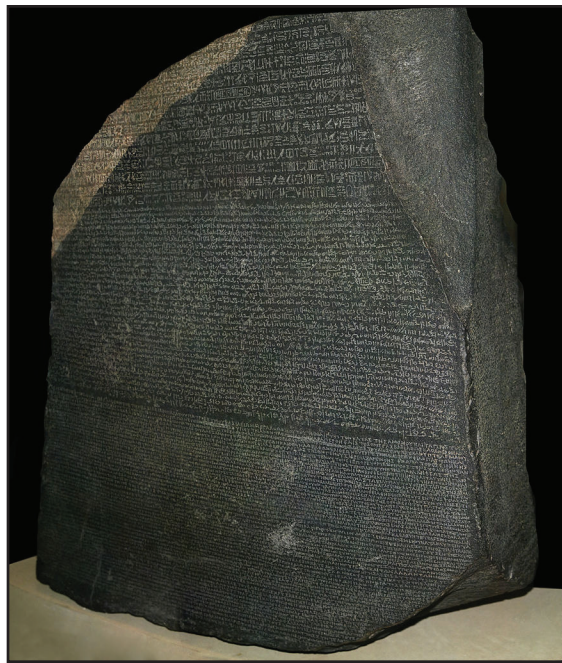
But then, Napoleon conquered Egypt. He sent some of the brightest engineers and scientists—like Pierre-François—to study stuff from ancient Egypt. Pierre-François traveled with a group of other scientists and engineers. They arrived in the city of Rosetta in 1799. On a tour of the harbor, Pierre-François found a unique stone. The stone had writing on it in three different languages including Greek and hieroglyphics. Pierre-François knew that Ancient Greeks often posted the same message in several languages. If the same message that was written in Greek was also written in hieroglyphics, then this stone could help people learn to read hieroglyphics. Pierre-François knew this stone from Rosetta was important. The stone was shipped back to Europe where experts could study it.

The stone became known as the Rosetta Stone. There were three forms of writing on it. It had hieroglyphics, demotic, and Greek. Demotic was a combination of hieroglyphics and an alphabet-based writing.

Europe was buzzing with the Rosetta Stone discovery. Scholars knew that the stone held the key to understanding and reading hieroglyphics.

The Rosetta Stone

It took many years, but finally someone was able to crack the code. The Rosetta Stone proved to be the key to understanding Egyptian hieroglyphics. Jean-François Champollion used it and was the first to crack the code in 1822. The world was never the same since. In the years that followed, scholars flocked to Egypt to learn all they could about Ancient Egyptian life and knowing how to read hieroglyphics made this much easier. Most of what we know today about Ancient Egypt is thanks to Pierre-François Bouchard's discovery in 1799.



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