Anyone who has studied ancient Egypt will be familiar with Jean François Champollion. He was, after all, credited with deciphering hieroglyphics from the Rosetta Stone and thus giving scholars the key to understanding hieroglyphics. For this effort along, he is frequently referred to as the Father of Egyptology, for he provided the foundation that scholars would need in order to truly understand the ancient Egyptians. Even though he suffered a stroke, dying at the age of forty-one, he himself added to our knowledge of this grand, ancient civilization by translating any number of Egyptian texts prior to his death.

Champollion was born on December 23rd, 1790 in the town of Figeac, France to Jacques Champollion and Jeanne Francoise. He was their youngest son, and was educated originally by his elder brother, Jacques Joseph (1778-1867). While still at home, he attempted to teach himself a number of languages, including Hebrew, Arabic, Syriac, Chaldean and Chinese. In 1801, at the age of ten, he was sent off to study at the Lyceum in Grenoble. There, at the young age of sixteen, he read a paper before the Grenoble Academy proposing that the language of the Coptic Christians in contemporary Egypt was actually the same language spoken
language to be at least an evolutionary form of the language spoken in the pharaonic period, spiked with the tongues of its foreign invaders such as the Greeks.

His studies continued at the College de France between 1807 and 1809, where he specialized in Oriental languages. He would eventually add Coptic, Ethiopic, Sanskrit, Zend, Pahlavi and Persian to his linguistic repertoire.

By the age of eighteen, he was accepted as a teacher of history and politics at Grenoble in 1809, and in the next year, he earned a doctor of letters. In 1811, he published his Introduction to Egypt Under the Pharaohs and in 1814, Egypt of the Pharaohs, or Researches in Geography, Religion, Language and History of the Egyptians Before the Invasion of Cambyses. During this period (1812), he married Rosine Blanc, who would provide him with a daughter, Zoraide, in 1824. This must have been a heady year for the young Frenchmen, for he also published the book titled Precis du systeme hieroglyphique, which expanded his earlier work on hieroglyphic translation that would serve as a basis for all later discoveries on the ancient Egyptian text.

Champollion continued to teach history and politics at Grenoble until 1816, and in 1818, he was appointed to a chair in history and geography at the Royal College of Grenoble, a position that he held until 1821. This new position apparently allowed him additional time to do research on the ancient language and the archaeology of ancient Egypt. During this period, he gained the patronage of the French kings, Louis XVIII and Charles X, which allowed him to travel on royally sponsored missions in order to examine museum collections such as those in Turin, Leghorn where he examined the Henry Salt collection which he would later persuade Charles X to purchase for the Louvre, Rome where he studied the obelisk and the papyrus of the Vatican Library, Naples and Florence.

After his return from these studies abroad, he was appointed as conservator of the Louvre Museum's Egyptian collection in 1826 and was responsible for its opening to the public in December of 1827. In 1828, he made his first and only trip to Egypt, where he was accompanied by his former Italian pupil Ippolito Rosellini (1800-1843). He had actually
befriended the Italian, who would become known as the founder of Egyptology in Italy, while touring Egyptian museum collections in Italy four years earlier. This journey, known as the Franco-Tuscan expedition, was subsidized by the French government and the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Leopold II.

Champollion landed in Alexandria in August 1828 and explored both Egypt and Nubia as far as the second cataract. He stayed in Egypt until 1829, with his friend Rosellini, and this was the first systematic survey of the history and geography of Egypt to examine the ancient monuments and their inscriptions after the Napoleonic Description de l'Egypte. In fact, part of the reason for the expedition was to complete the archaeological section of the Description de l'Egypte. While in Egypt, his enthusiastic letters which he wrote were published day by day, and after his death, they were reprinted in a book form by his brother in 1833, and again by his daughter in 1868.

On January 1st, 1829, he wrote to Dacier, the head of the Academie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, from Wadi Halfa in Nubia:
“I am proud to be able to announce, now that I have followed the course of the Nile from its mouth to the second cataract, that we need change nothing in our Letter on the hieroglyphical alphabet. Our alphabet is good: it can be successfully applied to the Egyptian monuments dating from Roman and Ptolemaic times, and then which is of far greater importance, to the inscriptions on all the temples, places and tombs of the pharaonic era. All of this vindicates the encouragement you were so kind as to give my work on the hieroglyphs at a time when they were far from being favourably received.”

Champollion's notes and sketches, together with Rosellini's engravings which were finished later, made up some of the first documentary later be used as the basis for the field investigations by such individuals as Karl Richard Lepisus and John Gardner Wilkinson.

He bought back from Egypt a considerable number of antiquities to enrich the Louvre's Egyptian collection.

Upon his return to France, he was made a member of the Academie des Inscriptions, and in 1831, a chair in Egyptian history and archaeology was specifically created for him at the College de France. Soon, however, he retired to Quercy, and devoted the last months of his life to the completion and revision of his Egyptian grammar and dictionary. On March 4th, 1832, while still preparing the results of his investigations in Egypt, he was struck down by a stroke in Paris, and was buried in Père Lachaise cemetery.
Deciphering the Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphics

In a certain way, Champollion’s race to decipher the Egyptian texts was not unlike the space race of the 20th century. It was not a sudden flash of recognition, but a time consuming pursuit with others nipping at his heels. His final success resulted from his long years of linguistic study of arcane languages, and others in his field contributed to his ultimate goal.

Hieroglyphic writing had long fascinated scholars such as Athanasius Kircher in the seventeenth century and Georg Zoega in the eighteenth, as well as those on Bonaparte’s expedition to Egypt. As early as 1802, the Frenchman Silvestre de Sacy (1758-1838) and the Swede Johan D avid Akerblad (1763-1813) tried to penetrate the secret of the Rosetta stone. Between 1814 and 1818, the celebrated Englishman, Thomas Young studied the artifact and was well educated to do so, with many of the language skills at his disposal as Champollion. But it would be Champollion who would eventually break the code.

Champollion’s quest really began in 1808, when he determined that fifteen signs of the demotic script corresponded with alphabetic letters in the Coptic language. He therefore concluded that this modern language held at least the last vestiges of that spoken by the ancient Egyptians. By 1818, after having examined an obelisk from Philae, he came to understand that some of the glyphs had a phonetic value and were thus part of an alphabet, even though other symbols were strictly symbolic ideograms.

Of course, his breakthrough came with the Rosetta Stone. The Greek era artifact recorded identical text in hieroglyphs, demotic Egyptian and Greek. Others had first examined this stone, but he recognized the Ptolemy name in Greek.

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and demotic, and was therefore able to identify the hieroglyphic rendering.

Of course, Champollion was not studying the Rosetta Stone exclusively. For example, in 1822, his friend the architect Nicolas Huyot (1780-1840) presented him with copies of the inscriptions on the temple at Abu Simbel, from which Champollion was able to decipher the name of Ramesses, part of whose name was written phonetically and the other part in ideograms.

Champollion did not publish any of his decipherment work, probably secreting it away on purposes since others had the same goal as he, until in 1822 he read his famous Lettre a M. Dacier, the permanent secretary of the French Academies des Inscriptions, before the Academie des Inscriptions. In this document he made it known that his efforts had revealed an alphabet of twenty-six letters, including syllabic signs, of which ten were identified completely. However, two others were only partly correct, and fourteen others were later proved to be wrong, or missing. He had also figured out the use of determinatives. The letter stated in part:

"I am convinced that the same hieroglyphic-phonetic signs used to represent the sound of Greek and Roman proper names were used in hieroglyphic texts carved long before the Greeks came to Egypt, and that these already reproduced sounds or articulation in the same way as the cartouches carved under the Greeks and Romans. The discovery of this precious and decisive fact is due to my work on pure hieroglyphic script. It would be impossible to prove it in the present letter without going into lengthy detail."
Two years later he followed this with his *Precis du système hieroglyphique* (Paris, 1824, 2nd ed., 2 vols., 1828), a more definitive, expanded analysis. He also corrected some of the mistakes that had been made by his English contemporary, Thomas Young (1773-1879), and we can only wonder what else he might have accomplished had he not died at such an early age.

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