

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 very talented but he was pulled out of school to join a special force in the French army that was being 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 and his army conquered many parts of Europe and Africa, including Egypt.

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 the language of the people. This caused some problems between locals and their Greek rulers, as you can imagine.

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Egyptian hieroglyphics appear at the top of the picture

Egyptian hieroglyphics are a special form of writing that use simple pictures called glyphs. The glyphs stand for different words and 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.

Greek rulers began to lose control over parts of Egypt about a hundred years after they first arrived. To publicize the law people were supposed to be following, one Greek ruler posted in important towns across the country. Back then, they didn't just pin up posters. The Greeks carved important laws and other decrees in stone. But in order to ensure that everyone—both Greek and Egyptian alike—understood his laws, the ruler made sure they 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 and even the Egyptians eventually forgot how to read hieroglyphics. Soon, the meaning of Egyptian hieroglyphics became a mystery lost to the ages.

But then, when Napoleon conquered Egypt, he sent some of the brightest engineers and scientists—like Pierre-François—to study stuff from ancient Egypt. Pierre-François traveled around the country with a group of other scientists and engineers. They arrived in the city of Rosetta in 1799 and on a tour of the harbor, Pierre-François found a unique stone. The stone had writing on it in three different languages. One was Greek and the other was Egyptian 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 be the key to uncovering the

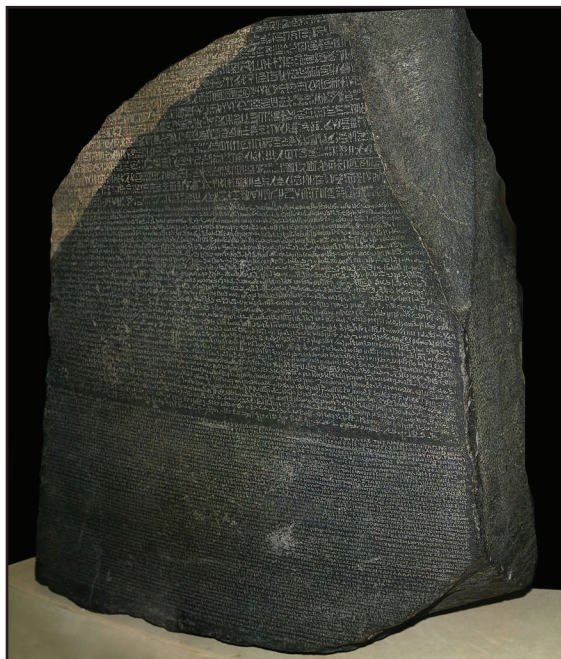
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long-lost meaning of hieroglyphics. Pierre-François knew this stone from Rosetta was important. The stone was shipped back to Europe where experts could study it.

The stone became known as the Rosetta Stone. There were three forms of writing on it: 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.

It took many years, but finally someone was able to crack the code and the Rosetta Stone proved to be the key to understanding Egyptian hieroglyphics. Jean-François Champollion was the first to crack the code using the stone 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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