

THE ROSETTA STONE

BY TONY BECKWITH



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When you stand on the steps of the British Museum you are literally on the threshold of history. This venerable institution houses a vast collection of the world's art and cultural artifacts, assembled and displayed here since the Museum was founded in 1753. The building's impressive façade dates back to the 1820s, when the English architect Sir Robert Smirke (1780–1867) was commissioned to redesign the original edifice, and contributed the colonnade of forty-four Greek Ionic columns that still stand today.



On my most recent visit I was primarily interested in visiting the Egyptian Sculpture Gallery, one of the building's most notable rooms, also designed by Smirke. Egyptian antiquities have been part of the Museum's permanent collection ever since it opened its doors. Some years later, after the British navy defeated Napoleon's expeditionary force at the Battle of the Nile in 1801, certain Egyptian artifacts held by the French were deemed to be the property of the British Crown under the terms of the Capitulation of Alexandria. The French disputed the claim and refused to yield the items in question. In these tense and testy circumstances, laced with a measure of intrigue, the artifacts nonetheless found their way into British hands, and were brought to London where



they were presented to the Museum. Among those pieces was the Rosetta Stone, which has been on public display since 1802, and which was specifically what I had come to see.

Why the interest in the Rosetta Stone? Because it is one of the most iconic examples of a translator's work in Western history. The stone is a symbol of the art and the practice of translation going back nearly two thousand years, giving the craft a legitimacy that warms the heart. Humans have been talking to each other for tens of thousands of years, ever since we evolved beyond grunting, and it's no stretch to claim that at some point we developed a need for interpreting—translation's older sister.

Then we learned to write circa 3,000 BC, but the archaeological record suggests that the earliest written documents were things like inventories, invoices, and local administrative proclamations and decrees. There was probably not much call for translation in those early days.

By the final century BC, however, things had changed. Alexander the Great conquered Egypt in 332 BC and Greek became the language of the ruling class. The general population continued to speak Egyptian, though, so official messages were often communicated in bilingual form, as has happened in many countries ever since. The Rosetta Stone is a tantalizing example of this practice; a stela whose inscription—a decree passed in Memphis, Egypt in 196 BC—is chiseled in three different scripts, Greek, ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, and demotic. It is a large piece of granite which, in its original state, was probably rounded at the top. It unfortunately suffered considerable wear and tear after it was removed, for reasons unknown, from the temple where it had been placed, and subsequently used as construction material for a fortress erected in a village in the Nile Delta called Rashid, better known to Europeans as Rosetta. In 1799, during the French campaign in Egypt, Napoleon's soldiers were refurbishing that fort, and found the battered stela while demolishing a wall. They understood the stone's significance and took it to French headquarters in Cairo for safekeeping.

Standing nearly four feet high and weighing almost three quarters of a ton, the stone was later confiscated by the British and transported under cover of darkness on a gun-carriage to the docks where it was loaded onto HMS *Egyptienne*, a captured French frigate, and brought to England. Copies of the inscriptions were made and sent to a number of scholars, igniting a firestorm of interest since it was clear to all that they might help to solve the enduring mystery of Egyptian hieroglyphs. It was assumed that all three texts inscribed on the stone said the same thing and, since the Greek portion was understandable, interested parties hoped it would help them to decipher the other two scripts.

The earliest English translation of the Greek text on the Rosetta Stone was presented to the Society of Antiquaries in London in April 1802. A French translation was already available, and a Latin version had been produced a year earlier. But the other scripts were nowhere near as accommodating. Deciphering the two Egyptian scripts took many years and alternately frustrated and elated some of the finest

linguists of the day. Very briefly, there were two main “detectives” involved.

Thomas Young (1773–1829), an English physician, physicist, and exceptional student of language, was the first to realize that Egyptian writing was based on both alphabetic and non-alphabetic signs. When he examined the Rosetta scripts closely, in 1814, he understood that hieroglyphs and demotic were closely related. His method consisted of finding a word in the Greek text which appeared more than once, and then looking for signs in the demotic script that appeared with similar frequency. He assumed that the signs that appeared on almost every line stood for ‘and’ in demotic. He also theorized that the groups of signs which appeared most frequently after that were demotic for ‘king,’ ‘Ptolemy,’ and ‘Egypt.’ He was thus able to identify certain demotic signs and associate them with the appropriate Greek words. He then went on to show that the elongated ovals or cartouches in the hieroglyphs were used to refer to a royal name, which in this case was Ptolemy.

Thomas Young shared the results of his research with the French scholar Jean-François Champollion (1790–1832). Champollion had studied Coptic, the language of the Christian descendants of the ancient Egyptians, which helped him to go further than Young had been able to do. He deciphered the phonetic values of many syllabic signs and identified a number of characters whose meaning he had ascertained from the Greek text. Champollion presented his findings in 1822, and continued to work on the Rosetta Stone puzzle until his untimely death just ten years later. His scholarship laid the groundwork for our knowledge of the ancient Egyptian language, and he is rightly considered the main “code breaker” of those mysterious hieroglyphics.

A couple of centuries later I stand peering at the inscribed surface. The quality of the work confirms what we already knew, which is that fine chiseling was not a recently-acquired skill, but the presence of three different scripts on the same stone was, at the time it was found, unprecedented. This was essentially the first bilingual document ever discovered. For a translator, that was a wildly exciting idea.

The inscriptions on the Rosetta Stone are written in two languages, Egyptian and Greek, but in three different scripts. The first of the Egyptian texts is written in hieroglyphs, the formal pictorial script in use since the beginning of the First Dynasty nearly 3,000 years earlier. Hieroglyphs were used primarily as a monumental script for incising into hard materials or for painting in elaborate, colorful detail on plaster or wood. They appear in almost every medium; but on papyrus from an early date they were generally superseded by hieratic, a cursive script derived from hieroglyphs. The second Egyptian text on the stone is in demotic, an extremely cursive script which evolved from abbreviated and modified hieratic and which replaced hieratic as the script used for all but religious texts from about 643 BC. The third inscription is written in Greek capitals.¹

Who translated that decree? Given that Greek was the language of the bureaucracy in 196 BC, I would speculate that the original text was written in Greek, and the other two versions were translations. Did one translator produce both the hieroglyphic and demotic versions, or would there have been two translators involved? Again, I would speculate that there was just one, and I would also posit that he or she was employed or paid by the official entity that authored the decree. By that time, the Egyptian authorities had been dealing with their bilingual situation for over a century, so this can hardly have been the first time that a document had to be translated. Although the translator would have had to be fluent in Greek to be on the government payroll, he or she would probably not have been a member of the ruling elite and therefore would also have been familiar with both the vernacular and the official/religious versions of the Egyptian language.

I suggested earlier that the translator might have been either a man or a woman but of course I have no idea. I feel more confident suggesting that a man would have done the chiseling, given the physical nature of the work, and wonder whether whoever incised the decree on the Rosetta Stone might have been a budding sculptor, making a little money on the side at the government print shop. For surely, in certain simple, fundamental ways, we 21st century translators are not

that different from those who lived in Egypt over two thousand years ago, are we? Whoever translated this decree very likely grew up bilingual, and was obviously sufficiently educated to have acquired the linguistic skills needed to translate a government document. In the early days of writing, many centuries earlier, scribes held a privileged position in society. Very few people could write in those days—even the king was often illiterate—so anyone who could do so became part of an inner circle, as an interpreter still does today. Once a burgeoning bilingual society put pressure on the authorities, it is not hard to imagine translators enjoying the patronage of palace scribes and becoming part of the hierarchy. Moving up in the world.

As I peer at the Rosetta Stone I imagine our translator reading her assignment, the decree that established the divine cult of King Ptolemy V, the new ruler. She runs the words through her mind. “In the reign of the young one who has succeeded his father in the kingship, lord of diadems, most glorious, who has established Egypt and is pious toward the gods...”² She screws up her eyes. *Diadems?* Hmm. She takes a sip of water, looks back at the source text. “This decree shall be inscribed on a stela of hard stone in sacred [hieroglyphic] and native [demotic] and Greek characters and set up in each of the first, second, and third [rank] temples beside the image of the ever-living king.”³

A very polite guard taps me on the shoulder and tells me the museum is about to close. I snap back to the present and head for the exit. Around the corner, at a fish & chip shop, the menu is in five different languages.

Endnotes

- 1 *The Rosetta Stone*, by Carol Andrews; British Museum Press; 1981; page 12.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 25.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 28.