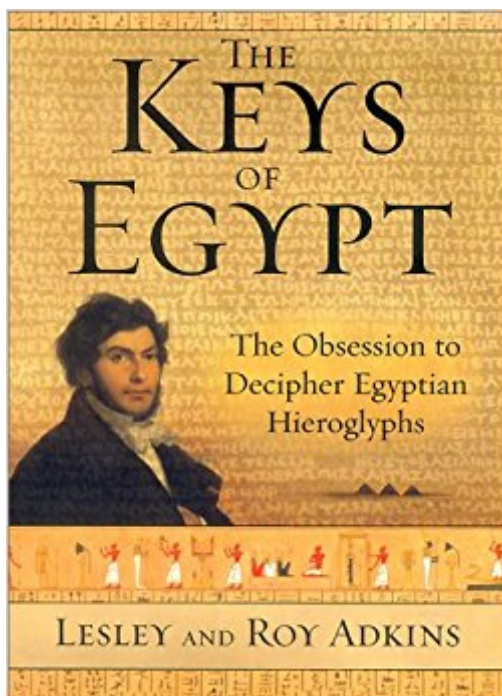


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# The Keys Of Egypt: The Obsession To Decipher Egyptian Hieroglyphs



## Synopsis

When Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798, his troops and scientists were astonished to discover ancient temples, tombs, and statues, all covered with strange markings-the last remnants of a language lost in time. After the Rosetta Stone was uncovered, hope was raised that the mystery of this ancient writing could be solved. Egyptomania spread throughout Europe, and the quest to decipher the hieroglyphs began in earnest, for it was understood that fame and fortune awaited the scholar who succeeded. In rural France, Jean-Francois Champollion, the brilliant son of an impoverished bookseller, was obsessed with breaking the code of the ancient Egyptians texts. At sixteen years of age he decided that he would dedicate his life to the decipherment of hieroglyphs. Suffering from hardships of poverty, but with devoted support from his older brother, Champollion made slow but significant progress in decipherment. After the Revolution, however, France was a dangerous place; an unguarded word could mean ruin, exile, or even death. Always possessed of strong political beliefs, Champollion often found himself in grave personal danger. Yet he continued to strive for the key to the ancient texts, and he persevered despite ill health and the knowledge that he was at the mercy of vicious political enemies. Even more troubling to him was the threat of failure-his closest competitor, the English physician Thomas Young, also working to solve the puzzle of the hieroglyphs, and he was rapidly gaining ground. In 1812, Champollion made the decisive breakthrough, beating Young to the prize and becoming the first person to be able to read the ancient Egyptian language in well over a thousand years. The Keys of Egypt is the fascinating true story of the race to decipher Egyptian hieroglyphs and of the rediscovery of the world of ancient Egypt- a world that had been closed to the West for centuries.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Jean-François Champollion's biography is neatly interwoven with Napoleonic history and the functions of Egyptian hieroglyphs in *The Keys of Egypt*. A gifted bookseller's son born in Revolutionary France, Champollion was to become "gripped by energetic enthusiasm" for Egypt. By the age of 12, he was studying several ancient languages, and, amid a "wave of Egyptomania," he would beat rivals to discover the key to deciphering hieroglyphs. If this was a race, it was a marathon. The breakthrough came after "20 years of obsessive hard work," not through the quick-fix solution often thought to have been provided by the Rosetta stone. *The Keys of Egypt* details Champollion's life and work, which were hampered by politics, poverty, and an almost hypochondriacal series of health problems. Its sources include letters and journals, the authors having undertaken researches in major libraries and museums. Chapters on Champollion's travels in Italy and Egypt include a good smattering of excerpts from his writings. Although no bibliography is given, there is a helpful passage on various levels of further reading. Highly instructive and fast-paced, *The Keys of Egypt* is perhaps less dramatic than it might be in portraying troubled times and groundbreaking discovery. It is, however, a clearly expressed and wide-ranging book explaining the complexity of hieroglyphic interpretation and revealing the man whose achievements "meant the discovery of a whole new civilization." --Karen Tiley, .co.uk

Set against a background of academic intrigue and international rivalry, with colorful personalities vying to be the first to unveil the meaning behind ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, the story of the decipherment of the Rosetta Stone has all the ingredients of a dramatic scientific quest. Disappointingly, the Adkinses, though experienced writers and consultants on archaeology, don't make the grade in this bland, lackluster account. Instead of approaching the subject matter with new questions and fresh analysis, the authors' predictable narrative adds little to our knowledge of either the French polyglot Jean-François Champollion (1790-1832), the genius who deciphered the stone, or of the decipherment process itself. The authors focus primarily on the life and education of Champollion, his extraordinary linguistic skills and his competition with Englishman Thomas Young, who was also seeking to decipher hieroglyphs. They maintain, rather inaccurately, that Champollion has not received due recognition, which they feel has instead gone to Young. Their description of the French occupation of Egypt at the time that the Rosetta Stone was discovered is superficial and fails to take into account some of the more recent scholarship on the subject. The authors, in fact,

never indicate what sources they utilized for this study. There is a solid core of readers interested in ancient Egypt and hieroglyphs who will grab this book, but they will be disappointed. More satisfied will be the novices turned on to ancient Egypt by the promotion around Abrams's Valley of the Golden Mummies. Savvy booksellers will piggyback the Adkinses' book onto that one. Illus. not seen by PW. (Oct. 15) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

My son loves it. His Uncle recommended it

This book is interesting but I was looking for actual keys to deciphering Egyptian Hieroglyphics not about those who went in search for clues to crack the code. All in all, it is still a good book. Sarah

I found this book at our library's book sale and ran, giddy, over to the cashier and demanded they take my money right away. I love history, I love Ancient Egypt and I was certain I was going to love this book. Little did I know I was going to more than love it, though I don't at all know how to best describe my extreme joy in turning each page. Typically books about history read like history books, text books, or maybe have a little drama in them, but this book read almost like a mystery waiting to be solved, which is exactly what hieroglyphs were at the time, making the all around perfection of this writing even more of a surprise considering the subject. Do not expect a dry rambling when you pick up this book, expect adventure! Also, make sure you pack a pencil and paper along as you journey through time because this book made me realize there were many other things I wanted to read about Egyptian Hieroglyphs, the Ancient Egyptian language and writing style, and the history of rediscovering the language itself. As a result of loving this book, I have added many more to my shelves. It isn't every day that you say you will read a nonfiction work again, but I most certainly will reread this one!

All of us have seen hieroglyphics, and yet I have to admit I've never given much thought to the fact we can actually understand them. And yet \*someone\* at some point had to have diligently studied these symbols and deciphered their meaning; cracking the secret of a written language that had been lost hundreds of years ago. That someone was Jean-François Champollion, a young Frenchman who struggled with ill-health and abject poverty in his bid to uncover the secret of the Rosetta Stone. Beginning with the invasion of Egypt by Napoleon in 1798, the book covers Champollion's childhood, his close relationship with his brother Jacques-Joseph, his fascination with languages, the political turmoil he lived through, and his ongoing quest to finally understand the

glyphs of the ancient Egyptians, even in the face of bitter rivalry and sabotage by other scholars. In many ways his story is a sad one: despite his incredible achievement he was never really acclaimed during his lifetime, and even after his contribution to the world's knowledge he struggled with hardship and slander. This book helps set the record straight, detailing his intellect, his techniques, his correspondence, and his trip to Egypt in 1828 to translate texts that had been unread for centuries. Though husband and wife authors Lesley and Roy Adkins are clearly great admirers of Champollion, their account of his life and time (and those of his opponents) is recorded dispassionately and without prejudice. For someone with no background in linguistics whatsoever, it can be quite difficult to grasp Champollion's process of translation, but with enough concentration it's fascinating to see how his thought-process aligns with the internal logic of the hieroglyphs and the fatal mistakes those other would-be translators made. Champollion is something of an unsung hero: not a soldier or a leader or a politician, but whose contribution to the human race is immeasurable. His work unlocked the Egyptian dynasty to further study that goes on to this day, and so a biography of his life is well overdue.

If you are like me, you learned at some point that Napoleon's forces had located the Rosetta Stone while invading Egypt, leading to the rediscovery of how to read ancient Egyptian. The writing on the stone contained the same material in Greek, Demotic, and hieroglyphs. From comparing the three texts, scholars deciphered hieroglyphs. Sounds simple, doesn't it? Well, it really wasn't, which is where our school book learning was incomplete. And that's the appeal of this unusual book. Why do I say the book is unusual? Well, most books about scholarly discoveries focus on the work itself. While this one certainly contains information about how the hieroglyphs were translated, the main focus is on what it was like to be a French scholar in a high visibility area from the time after the French Revolution through the Restoration. The story is a fascinating one of constant intrigue, danger, poverty, and overwhelming odds overcome. This book would qualify as an exciting novel if written that way. Jean-Francois Champollion was the key translator who finally succeeded in 1822, 23 years after the Rosetta Stone was discovered. He was the son of an impoverished book seller at 16 when the stone was found. His main competitor was an English physician, Thomas Young, who was to turn out to be an implacable foe who denigrated and challenged Champollion's work. The work would have gone on much more rapidly, but there was a shortage of materials available to Champollion to work on. He also had the difficult task of getting an education and then earning his living as a teacher, and often had to put off working on the hieroglyphs for long periods of time. When the Restoration came, he and his brother were exiled to the small town they started in. But

they succeeded in regaining official support for their careers, and were able to continue. Despite the challenges, Champollion (with a lot of help from his friends, and especially his older brother) was eventually able to get recognition for his accomplishments and support from Charles X to go to Italy to study texts and later Egypt to translate the monuments and texts there. In the brief period of time before his death in 1832, he added tremendously to our knowledge of ancient Egypt and its culture. The key problem was that the same hieroglyph (such as the picture of a duck) can represent an object (the duck), a concept ("son of"), and a sound ("sa"). One of the key breaks came in finding cartouches of foreign names that were easier to decipher because they used the phonetic versions. Having had success there, with access to more material it was easy to notice cartouches that seemed to represent the names of well-known Egyptian Pharaohs such as Ramses (described as "Rameses" in the book). Cleopatra's name was an early translation breakthrough. Soon, these cartouches provided clues to the multiple ways that hieroglyphs can be used. Numerical analysis showed that the number of hieroglyphs on the Rosetta stone did not match very well to the number of words or letters in the Greek text. That suggested that something more complex was going on than using a straight-forward alphabet from hieroglyphs. Champollion soon made quick progress from there. He had an amazing talent for languages, having earlier produced a Coptic dictionary. Champollion also uncovered that hieroglyphs were formal writing, Hieratic was cursive handwriting, Demotic dated from 650 B.C., and Coptic began in 250 A.D. So the dating of the materials studied could be determined in part by the languages used. After you finish enjoying this interesting book, I suggest that you think about how languages divide us. Most of us read only in our native language. This means that works in other languages first have to be translated before we can enjoy them. Many works are never so translated. I urge you to take another language that you know and read something in that language. That experience allows you to enjoy the other culture much more than you can with a translation. If your language skills are not sufficient to do this, I suggest that you read something that has been translated by two different translators in separate editions. Compare them to see how much translations can vary. Although my examples focus on languages, you should also realize that such differences in understanding occur in one language. So pay close attention and check your assumptions when you read and listen to someone speak. For example, be open to what is not being said and is not being written, but is present. Don't miss the subtleties that may reveal most of the meaning to you! Look, listen, and learn.

I read this book years ago, gave it away, and have been desperately trying to get it back. It is by far the best thing I have ever read on cracking the hieroglyphic code, being both well written and easy

to understand. Finally having given up on getting my copy back, I found it here at a price I was willing to pay to replace it. I am overjoyed that I will have a chance to read it again. Highly recommended.

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