

MYSTERIES UNEARTHED

ROSETTA STONE (can be seen in the British Museum)

Brief History

For centuries the text on Egyptian monuments were not understood, because no one had the key to its decipherment as all knowledge of Ancient Egyptian was lost by the end of the fourth century AD.

Then in 1799, digging near the Rosetta mouth of the Nile, Boussard (a French engineer of Napoleon Bonaparte's campaign) uncovered a black basalt stone, which became the key to the recovery of the ancient Egyptian language. This stela, dated to year 9 of Ptolemy V (196 BC), measured 3ft 9ins high by 2ft 4ins wide and 11ins thick, had inscribed on its face three scripts of two languages, Egyptian and Greek in the following order: (1) hieroglyphic, or picture writing, (2) demotic, a cursive Egyptian script, (3) Greek, cut in ordinary uncials. Of the three languages only the Greek could be translated, the other's being unknown.

Supposing that the three scripts told the same story, scholars [Thomas Young (1773-1829)] had only succeeded in correctly translating a few hieroglyphic signs and reading the name of Ptolemy.

Then in 1818, Jean Francois Champollion (1790-1832), a brilliant young Frenchman, began work on the Rosetta Stone. With his considerable knowledge of Coptic and patient comparison of the two unknown registers with the equivalents in the known Greek, he read the name of Cleopatra on another text (Bankes Obelisk) and formulated a correct system of Egyptian decipherment.

Noticing the lines around certain characters, it was believed that these cartouches contained royal names, as they occurred several times in the inscription. Knowing the Greek, they succeeded in deciphering the names and by means of these letters discovered they obtained the key to the whole hieroglyphic alphabet.

No other country as Egypt has left behind such a panorama of wall paintings, reliefs in both stone and wood, whereby we can gain much material helpful in understanding the culture and civilization of Bible times. For instance, in the story of Joseph and Pharaoh's dream (Genesis 41:24) we have the mention of Pharaoh's magicians. References to magicians are frequently found on the monuments — on the Rosetta Stone, for instance. Subsequent translations of Egyptian texts have now done much to illuminate and confirm the Biblical text.