

Jean-François Champollion -
His attributes and what we can learn from them.



Jean-François Champollion (23 December 1790 – 4 March 1832)

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In the explanation of the Rosetta Stone, we are informed that it has been chosen “to represent and recognise the many attributes he [Champollion] brought to bear in providing the key to deciphering the important historical texts and hieroglyphics on the Stone”. But what were those attributes? And what can we learn from them? After all, we are instructed that his “worthy example should inspire us”.

By looking at Champollion’s achievements and endeavours, and the views of contemporaries, we can consider these attributes – both positive and negative.

When he was around 5 years old, he witnessed a beggar being struck by a walking-stick in order to make him rise and get out the way. Jean-François, furious at the injustice, tried to grab the stick, crying out “Wicked stick, you obey this bad man that you should rather thrash”. His mother was told, “You would do well to trim right away the beak and claws of your fledgling so that others are not obliged to do it”. As an adult, when attacked by an adversary, he would remark: “Fortunately, I was given a beak and claws”.

At a similar age, Jean-François taught himself how to read and write through a process of trial and error, matching the words of memorised prayers with the words printed on the page, also grasping the different sounds of letters.

His older brother, Jacques-Joseph, began teaching Champollion. Replying to a confession of struggling to concentrate on his studies, Jacques-Joseph warned him: “since you have confessed to me that your mind is fickle you must try to acquire some perseverance. Never forget that time lost is irreparable, apply yourself well to your studies. Consider that nothing is more shameful for a pupil than laziness and negligence... ignoramuses are good for nothing”.

Champollion mastered a wide range of languages, including Coptic. Spoken Coptic was descended from ancient Egypt, but written Coptic was not hieroglyphic. He aimed to translate the Greek sentences on the Rosetta stone into Coptic and then match these with the demotic sentences.

In June 1808 he wrote “the attempt made on the Egyptian text produced no result... the [demotic] proper names I read are not in exact accordance [the same position] with the Greek text”. So discouraging was this that he did not bother with an analysis of the hieroglyphic text! In August he tried to apply his own version of a demotic alphabet to a papyrus, which he wrongly presumed to be written in a cursive form of the same script that appeared on the Rosetta Stone. Again, he failed. In September he informed his brother: “I have found clear sense analogous with the context and in an acceptable style. And I cannot advance more than this. I cannot go further – some groups prevent me – I have studied them, pondered for entire days and I have understood nothing.

Champollion abandoned his analysis of the Rosetta Stone from 1809 until 1814 during which time he completed a Coptic dictionary. An English antiquary noted in 1827: "I think there are few Coptic books in Europe [Champollion] has not examined... there is no book in the Vatican in that language, that has not remarks of Champollion in almost every page."

Although he still floundered with deciphering the Rosetta Stone it was not all failure. He observed that if the hieroglyphic section was a translation of the Greek section then it must include the Greek proper names. This was impossible "if these hieroglyphs did not have the power to produce sounds". For the first time in his career Champollion was proposing a phonetic element in hieroglyphic – but only the spelling of non-Egyptian proper names.

But he also made an astounding claim: "I have seen my efforts crowned by almost complete success". He was sensible enough not to publish these knowing he was far from cracking either the demotic or the hieroglyphic systems.

Of Dr Thomas Young, his English rival in deciphering the Rosetta Stone, Champollion commented: "The Englishman knows no more Egyptian than he does Malay or Manchu... I am truly sorry for the unfortunate English travellers ... obliged to translate the inscriptions of Thebes with the master-key of Dr Young in their hands". Maybe so – yet Champollion asked his brother to buy Young's article and send it to him!

In 1821 Champollion published three significant conclusions: First, hieroglyphic was the origin of demotic; second, hieratic “is not in any way alphabetical” and third that hieratic characters “are signs of things and not sounds”. Although the first conclusion was correct, the second and third were not. Champollion soon regretted this publication: In Paris he was alleged to have made strenuous efforts to withdraw all copies.

During 1822 Jean-François rushed from his house, flung a bundle of drawings of Egyptian inscriptions onto Jacques-Joseph’s desk crying: “Je tiens mon affaire!” (“I’ve done it!”). But before he could explain what he had done, he collapsed on the floor in a dead faint. His claim was overstated. He oversimplified the connection between the Egyptian and Coptic. A later Egyptologist said: “In reality Coptic is a remote derivative from ancient Egyptian, like French from Latin; in some cases, therefore, Champollion’s provisional transcripts produced good Coptic words, whilst mostly they were more or less meaningless or impossible... Syntax was hopelessly violated or the order of the hieroglyphic words ... inverted.”

Furthermore, the Coptic script, being written in a form of Greek, imposed Greek sounds onto written Egyptian, which was inappropriate, as the earlier stages of the hieroglyphs predated Greek. A better basis would probably have been Hebrew or Arabic.

Another early Egyptologist said: "His alphabet was thus in every point of view defective; and though highly creditable to him as a first attempt, is quite unworthy of the present state of hieroglyphical knowledge".

Visiting Abu Simbel, he said: "This experimental visit proved to me that one can spend two and a half to three hours in the interior of the temple without suffering any breathing difficulties, only some weakening of the legs and joints". Despite disabling attacks of gout, he walked painfully from his boat, supported by two servants, half-undressed himself and entered what he called "the furnace". Despite the searing heat and the resistance of some exhausted and disgruntled expedition members, they studied some sixteen tombs in all.

Even near the end of his life, Champollion worked hard, only stopping lecturing the year before his death. He was working flat out on his grammar, continuing his duties as a curator at the Louvre, campaigning for obelisks to be brought to Paris, writing articles, and corresponding with scholars across Europe. In December 1831 he collapsed unconscious in the lecture hall. On 13 December he suffered a stroke, which left him partly paralysed and bed-ridden.

Although Champollion was a driven, hard-working individual he was also one who polarised opinion.

His biographers variously noted his 'outbursts, renunciations, enthusiasm, dejection – such was and would always be the way'. He had a 'volcanic temperament' and a 'furious impatience', 'an implacable arguer', 'very little found favour in his eyes or under his pen'. These emotions gave him the passion and dedication to succeed, yet at the same time they undermined both his health and many of his relationships with other scholars.

Even his brother became exasperated. When discouraged in his study of a papyrus, Jacques-Joseph upbraided his brother: "You have read a line and a half – you have an alphabet and you rest there. I do not recognise you any more."

His own lectures on ancient history caused sensation. With considerable courage in the French political circumstances of the age, he lambasted historians for their slavishness to power. He also made it clear that, as a historical source of dates and geography, he was sceptical of the Old Testament. He challenged Catholic religious orthodoxy by supporting the idea that Egyptian civilisation began "about 6000 years before Islam", meaning it must be at least a millennium older than the date of the Creation in the Bible.

During his time in Italy, Champollion made known his displeasure at the poor state of conservation of various papyri. He also publicly ridiculed the museum's careless displays by distributing a pamphlet which had a dig at the museum director's penchant for dressing up statues!

But what of his relationship with Dr Thomas Young? Richard Parkinson (curator in charge of the Rosetta Stone at the British Museum) said in 2005: “Even if one allows that Champollion was more familiar with Young’s initial work than he subsequently claimed, he is the sole decipherer of the hieroglyphic script: any decipherment stands or falls as a whole, and while Young discovered parts of an alphabet – a key – Champollion unlocked an entire written language.

Young himself wrote: “he devotes his whole time to the pursuit and he has been wonderfully successful in some of the documents that he has obtained – but he appears to me to go too fast – and he makes up his mind in many cases where I should think it safer to doubt”. Of Champollion’s lack of reference to Young’s work he said, with great understatement: “I did certainly expect to find the chronology of my own researches a little more distinctly stated.”

Even after Young died, Champollion would not give up one iota of credit for the decipherment. Not only did he fail to mention Young’s achievements but also falsely accused Young on several accounts, most outrageously, that his analysis of the cartouches were ‘defective in principle’ and therefore led to ‘no results of any kind’.

Yet Champollion assisted Young with his Egyptian dictionary. Young wrote: “[he] has shown me far more attention than I ever showed or could show, to any living being: he devoted seven whole hours at once to looking over with me his papers ... He is to let me have the use... of all his collections and his notes relating to the enchorial character that I may make what use I please of them”.

As I stated at the beginning, Champollion’s “worthy example should inspire us”, for as we hear elsewhere, “what you observe praiseworthy in others you should carefully imitate, and what in them may appear defective you should in yourself amend”. So what should we imitate and what should we amend? Perhaps his biographer, Andrew Robinson, best puts it when he says: “I salute Champollion for his self-confidence, his fanaticism for a single cause, his courage, his sense of humour and his joie de vivre. Young attracts me for his modesty, his wide-ranging interests, his honesty, his analytical powers and his love of moderation”. Or, as the second degree working tools tell us: “to steer the bark of this life over the seas of passion without quitting the helm of rectitude is the highest perfection to which human nature can attain”.