



The Masonic Order of Athelstan

Grand Court

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The Rosetta Stone:

its history and its importance
to the Order of Athelstan

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INTRODUCTION

The Rosetta Stone is 114.4 centimetres high, at its tallest point, 72.3 centimetres wide, 27.9 centimetres thick and weighs 760 kg. It is made of Granodiorite; an igneous rock (this rock forms from molten magma located beneath the earth's surface) which cools and solidifies, in essence similar to granite, but darker in appearance. It is a dark grey-blue-pink in colour. The upper part was missing as was the lower right hand corner.

The stone has drawn a great deal of attention from historians for the last two centuries and represents an enormous transition in our ability to translate, and so begin to understand, the civilizations of the ancient Egyptian Pharaohic dynasties.

It is in actual fact a translation key, and as such, its impact on historic research is second to none. Its story, in itself is unique and this paper attempts to make that story clear and understandable.

This paper therefore aims to bring together facts about the stone itself, the period in which it was made, the nature of its discovery and its symbolic importance to the Masonic Order of Athelstan.

THE DISCOVERY OF THE ROSETTA STONE

The stone was discovered in Egypt during the Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte's Egyptian Campaign of 1798. The French were reinforcing their defences and in so doing were attempting to re-build part of a dilapidated fifteenth century fortress (the tower of Rosetta) near the Egyptian port city of Rosetta (now Rashid). The tower was later renamed Fort Julien after one of Napoleon's aides-de-camp, the Adjunct-General Julien.

The stone was discovered during this re-construction work, which was under the charge of a twenty eight year old French engineer named Captain Pierre-Francois Xavier Bouchard on July 15th 1799.

There are different stories of how the stone was found; some say it was a part of the fort's foundations, others say it was lying under debris. During the second week of July 1799 Bouchard's men were clearing away debris with the intention of strengthening the fort's infrastructure when they uncovered a highly polished dark stone. It was covered in many small and detailed marks and engravings, the top part was Hieroglyphs and the bottom Classical Greek and between the two, many odd characters.



We need to understand that prior to the stone's discovery in 1799, ancient Egypt had been a closed book to historic scholars. Nobody could interpret or read the hieroglyphs and interest in Egyptian culture and history was severely limited.



The French soldiers could read the Greek bottom passage but not the top hieroglyphs. It was clear that it was an official document of some kind which paid homage to Ptolemy V, and was written on the thirtieth anniversary of his coronation. It was in fact a 'decree' - an order made by the head of state which had the force of law. It was an official, legal, governmental document describing the repealing of various taxes and instructions to erect statues in temples to honour the Egyptian pharaoh Ptolemy V Epiphanes by listing all of the things that the pharaoh had done that were good for the priests and the people of Egypt.

The stone was an important discovery because it had, engraved on its surface, the same passage in three language scripts: Hieroglyphic, Demotic and Classical Greek. It enabled scholars to translate the ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphs from the known Classical Greek.

THE ROSETTA STONE

The Rosetta Stone is a stele; a stone or wooden slab which is generally taller than it is wide. Stelae are rightfully considered as records or documents, for a great deal of what we know about ancient civilizations has come from surviving stelae.

A stele was often erected for funerary or commemorative purposes and often decorated with the titles and names. These names would be carved in relief or even painted on the slab. Also, stelae were often used as territorial markers or to mark great military victories. These documents were used throughout the ancient world and it seems, quite independently, in China as well as in Buddhist cultures of the far east and Mayan cultures in South America. It is interesting to note that such stone records can be traced back to the Megalithic cultures in Britain's Neolithic (or new) Stone Age circa 5,000 BC.

The Rosetta Stone was created in the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt in 196 BC in the reign of Ptolemy V which was centred in Alexandria.



Ptolemy V Epiphanes

The Ptolemaic dynasty began, following Alexander the Great's conquest, in 332 BC and ended with the Roman conquest in 30 BC where it became the Roman Province of Ægyptus (30 BC – 261 AD) and became a major producer of grain for the Roman Empire.

The Founder was Ptolemy I Soter (the saviour) who was a Greek general and became the ruler of Egypt (323 BC – 283 BC). It is believed that he was the half-brother of Alexander the Great.



Silver coin depicting **Ptolemy I** (r. 305 - 283)

For reference, in Greece this was the period of Aristotle (384 BCE – 322 BCE).

The Ptolemaic dynasty was therefore a Hellenistic State: a Greek state governed by Greek law. (The term Hellenistic is used to refer to the spreading of Greek culture over non-Greek people and creating a fusion of Greek and Near Eastern cultures or Southeast Asia).

WRITING

The ancient Egyptians invented scripts to document information about religion and government. Throughout the three thousand years of Egyptian civilization, at least three scripts, besides the hieroglyphic script, were used, often for different purposes. By using these scripts Scribes were able to preserve the beliefs, history and ideas of Ancient Egypt. To these ends they used papyrus scrolls and dyes, temple and tomb walls and pieces of stone. It was therefore historically important that if the ancient writings could be deciphered by academics, we would have access to their whole civilisation and their whole culture and way of life. The Rosetta Stone proved to be the crucial key that was needed.

The three main scripts used when the Rosetta stone was carved were for specific purposes. The first was the hieroglyphics which were used for important or religious documents and richly decorated the Pharaohs' tombs.



**Detail of hieroglyphic and demotic
on the Rosetta Stone**

The second was demotic, or the common script of Egypt and the third was what we would now term as Classical Greek which was the language of the rulers of Egypt at that time. The Rosetta Stone was therefore written in all three scripts so that it could be read and understood by the priests, government officials and the ruling classes of Egypt.

UNDERSTANDING THE STONE

Bouchard showed the stone to General Jacques de Menou and they sent it to the *Institut de l'Egypte* (The Egyptian institute) where Napoleon had numerous scientists, scholars and researchers. In March 1801 the British landed and the stone was carried from Cairo to Alexandria. After the French surrendered, British General John Hely-Hutchinson claimed all Egyptian materials and findings to be the property of the British Crown. The stone was hidden, eventually to be transported to England by Colonel Tomkyns Hilgrove-Turner, leaving the French scholars with imprints and plaster casts of the stone.

The stone arrived in England on 11th March 1802 and was presented to the Society of Antiquaries of London and later taken to the British Museum where it still remains with plaques stating "Captured by the British Army in 1801" and "Presented to King George III".

TRANSLATING THE ROSETTA STONE

A number of scholars worked on translating Demotic and Hieroglyphic scripts. The process was complex, because initially, scholars had no idea whether the hieroglyphs represented concepts, facts or even sounds. In 1818 Dr Thomas Young compiled the results of his studies of the Rosetta texts for the fourth volume of the Encyclopedia Britannica and was the first to grasp the idea of a phonetic principle and assigned, in most cases, correct values to some of the Egyptian hieroglyphs. He was also the first to apply it to their decipherment.

From 1822 Jean-François Champollion, who could read both Greek and Coptic (a descendant language of Egyptian Hieroglyphs and Demotic scripts) greatly expanded on this work. He eventually found tentative principles based upon phonetic values for hieroglyphic symbols. Champollion corrected and greatly enlarged the list of alphabetic Egyptian characters previously drawn up by Young, and drew up a classified list of Egyptian hieroglyphs, formulating a grammar and general decipherment which became the foundation used by all later Egyptologists. Champollion is now known as the translator of the Rosetta Stone.

It is important to note that the deciphering of the Rosetta Stone was not the work of one man alone. Champollion built on others' work and liaised with the community of scholars that worked on the stone and casts of the stone. In actual fact Champollion never actually saw the stone - all of his work was achieved by working from a plaster casting.

The work of these men enabled understanding of the ancient Egyptian culture, enabled us to read and understand that culture's religions, beliefs, history, public life and government. This caught the imagination of the Victorians and in so doing fuelled a new drive to understand Egyptian culture which dominated and became an obsession throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

One could ponder on whether the ability to translate hieroglyphs would ever have been achieved without the stone or indeed without the skills, genius and dedication of scholars like Young and Champollion. Of course that is impossible to say - other bilingual stelae have been found since, but this misses the point. The story of the Rosetta Stone has meaning and symbolism beyond its historic and academic significance. The stone symbolizes 'challenge'; it represents 'adventure'; it is symbolic of 'duty', it represents 'discovery'. The stone symbolizes 'achievement and knowledge', and represents 'the brilliant realization of a dream that can become a reality'. It will ever remain the archetypal symbol of decipherment.

THE ROSETTA STONE AND THE MASONIC ORDER OF ATHELSTAN

So why did we choose to have this stone present, as a tracing board, in our Courts of the Masonic Order of Athelstan?

The Rosetta Stone holds so much symbolism that is dear to the order of Athelstan and to freemasonry in general, with its historic context and roots of Freemasonry alluding to the Egyptian and ancient king-making/raising ceremonies. It represents an ideological time that links with the scriptures of the Old Testament. As a Decree, it emphasises the need for government and hierarchy. It represents the coming together of different creeds and races to unite in harmony, and by so doing, form new cultures whilst supporting the old. It represents the responsibilities of rulers (Greek rulers and their responsibilities to the new people and culture they ruled). In effect, like Freemasonry, Alexandria was a centre which supported all cultures, trade, industry, creativity, architecture, mathematics, geometry, science, scholarly thinking and recording, philosophy and learning. These are all the same tenets of freemasonry today.

The Rosetta Stone is central to the Order of Athelstan for it symbolises the search for knowledge and the search for perfection in our own conduct and endeavours and the attainment of knowledge and understanding.

THE TRANSLATION OF THE ROSETTA STONE

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 towards the gods, triumphant over his enemies, who has restored the civilised life of men, lord of the Thirty Years Festivals even as Hephaistos the Great, a king like the Sun, great king of the Upper and Lower countries, offspring of the Gods Philopatores, one of whom Hephaistos has approved, to whom the Sun has given victory, the living image of Zeus, son of the Sun, Ptolemy, living for ever, beloved of Ptah, in the ninth year, when Aetos son of Aetos was priest of Alexander, and the Gods Soteres, and the Gods Adelphoi, and the Gods Euergetai, and the Gods Philopatores and the God Epiphanes Eucharistos; Pyrrha daughter of Philinos being Athlophoros of Berenike Euergetis; Areia daughter of Diogenes being Kanephoros of Arsinoe Philadelphos; Irene, daughter of Ptolemy being Priestess of Arsinoe Philopator; the fourth of the month of Xandikos, according to the Egyptians the 18th Mekhir.

Decree: There being assembled the Chief Priests and Prophets and those who enter the inner shrine for the robing of the Gods, and the Fan-bearers and the Sacred Scribes and all the other priests from the temples throughout the land who have come to meet the king at Memphis, for the feast of the assumption by Ptolemy, the ever-living, the beloved of Ptah, the God Epiphanes Eucharistos, the kingship in which he succeeded his father, they being assembled in the temple in Memphis this day declared:

Whereas king Ptolemy, the ever-living, the beloved of Ptah, the god Epiphanes Eucharistos, the son of King Ptolemy and Queen Arsinoe, the Gods Philopatores, has been a benefactor both to the temples and to those who dwell in them, as well as all those who are his subjects, being a god sprung from a god and goddess (like Horus the son of Isis and Osiris, who avenged his

father Osiris) (and) being benevolently disposed towards the gods, has dedicated to the temples revenues in money and corn and has undertaken much outlay to bring Egypt into prosperity, and to establish the temples, and has been generous with all his own means; and of the revenues and taxes levied in Egypt some he has wholly remitted and others he has lightened, in order that the people and all the others might be in prosperity during his reign;

and whereas he has remitted the debts to the crown being many in number which they in Egypt and in the rest of the kingdom owed;

and whereas those who were in prison and those who were under accusation for a long time, he has freed of the charges against them;

and whereas he has directed that the gods shall continue to enjoy the revenues of the temples and the yearly allowances given to them, both of corn and money, likewise also the revenue assigned to the gods from vine land and from gardens and the other properties which belonged to the gods in his father's time;

and whereas he directed also, with regard to the priests, that they should pay no more as the tax for admission to the priesthood than what was appointed them throughout his father's reign and until the first year of his own reign; and has relieved the members of the priestly orders from the yearly journey to Alexandria;

and whereas he has directed that impressment for the navy shall no longer be employed, and of the tax in byssus cloth paid by the temples to the crown he has remitted two-thirds;

and whatever things were neglected in former times he has restored to their proper condition, having a care how the traditional duties shall be fittingly paid to the gods;

and likewise has apportioned justice to all, like Hermes the great and great;

and has ordained that those who return of the warrior class, and of others who were unfavourably disposed in the days of the disturbances, should, on their return be allowed to occupy their old possessions,

and whereas he provided that cavalry and infantry forces and ships should be sent out against those who invaded Egypt by sea and by land, laying out great sums in money and corn in order that the temples and all those who are in the land might be in safety;

and having gone to Lycopolis in the Busirite nome, which had been occupied and fortified against a siege with an abundant store of weapons, and all other supplies (seeing that disaffection was now of long standing among the impious men gathered into it, who had perpetrated much damage to the temples and to all the inhabitants of Egypt), and having encamped against it, he surrounded it with mounds and trenches and elaborate fortifications: when the Nile made a great rise in the eighth year (of his reign), which usually floods the plains, he prevented it, by damming at many points the outlets of the channels (spending upon this no small amount of money), and setting cavalry and infantry to guard them, in a short time he took the town by storm and destroyed all the impious men in it, even as Hermes and Horus, the son of Isis and Osiris, formerly subdued the rebels in the same district; and as to those who had led the rebels in the time of his father and who had disturbed the land and done wrong to the temples, he came to Memphis to avenge his father and his own kingship, and punished them all as they deserved, at the time that he came there to perform the proper ceremonies for the assumption of the crown;

and whereas he remitted what was due to the crown in the temples up to his eighth year, being no small amount of corn and money; so also the fines for the byssus cloth not delivered to the crown, and of those delivered, the several fees for their verification, for the same period; and he also freed the temples of (the tax of) the artabe for every aroura of sacred land and likewise the jar of wine for each aroura of vine land; and whereas he bestowed many gifts upon Apis and Mnevis and upon the other sacred animals in Egypt, because he was much more considerate than the kings before him of all that belonged to the gods; and for their burials he gave what was suitable lavishly and splendidly, and what was regularly paid to their special shrines, with sacrifices and festivals and other customary observances; and he maintained the honours of the temples and of Egypt according to the laws; and he adorned the temple of Apis with rich work, spending upon it gold and silver and precious stones, no small amount; and whereas he has founded temples and shrines and altars, and has repaired those requiring it, having the spirit of a beneficent god in matters pertaining to religion;

and whereas after enquiry he has been renewing the most honourable of the temples during his reign, as is becoming; in requital of which things the gods have given him health, victory and power, and all other good things.

And he and his children shall retain the kingship for all time. With propitious fortune: It was resolved by the priests of all the temples in the land to increase greatly the existing honours of King Ptolemy, the ever-living, the beloved of Ptah, the god Epiphanes Eucharistos, likewise those of his parents the Gods Philopatores, and of his ancestors, the Gods Euergetai and the Gods Adelphoi and the Gods Soteris and to set up in the most prominent place of every temple an image of the ever-living King Ptolemy, the beloved of Ptah, the god Epiphanes Eucharistos, an image which shall be called that of 'Ptolemy, the defender of Egypt', beside which shall stand the principal god of the temple, handing him the weapon of victory, all of which shall be manufactured (in the Egyptian) fashion; and that the priests shall pay homage to the images three times a day, and put upon them the sacred garments, and perform the other usual honours such as given to the other gods in the Egyptian festivals; and to establish for King Ptolemy, the god Epiphanes Eucharistos, sprung of King Ptolemy and Queen Arsinoe, the Gods Philopatores, a statue and golden shrine in each of the temples, and to set it up in the inner chamber with the other shrines; and in the great festivals in which the shrines are carried in procession the shrine of the god Epiphanes Eucharistos shall be carried in procession with them.

And in order that it may be easily distinguishable now and for all time, there shall be set upon the shrine the ten gold diadems of the king, to which shall be added a uraeus but instead of the uraeus-shaped diadems which are upon the other shrines, in the centre of them shall be the crown called Pschent which he put on when he went into the temple at Memphis to perform therein the ceremonies for assuming the kingship: and there shall be placed on the square surface round about the diadems, beside the aforementioned crown, golden symbols (eight in number signifying) that it is (the shrine) of the king who makes manifest the Upper and Lower countries.

And since it is the 30th of Mesore on which the birthday of the king is celebrated, and likewise the 17th of Paophi) on which he succeeded his father in the kingship, they have held these days in honour as name-days in the temples, since they are sources of great blessings for all;

it was further decreed that a festival shall be kept in the temples throughout Egypt on these days in every month, on which there shall be sacrifices and libations and all the ceremonies

customary at the other festivals (and the offerings shall be given to the priests who) serve in the temples.

And a festival shall be kept for King Ptolemy, the ever-living, the beloved of Ptah, the god Epiphanes Eucharistos, yearly in the temples throughout the land from the 1st of Thoth for five days, in which they shall wear garlands and perform sacrifices and libations and the other usual honours, and the priests (in each temple) shall be called priests of the god Epiphanes Eucharistos in addition to the names of the other gods whom they serve; and his priesthood shall be entered upon all formal documents (and engraved upon the rings which they wear); and private individuals shall also be allowed to keep the festival and set up the aforementioned shrine and have it in their homes, performing the aforementioned celebrations yearly, in order that it may be known to all that the men of Egypt magnify and honour the god Epiphanes Eucharistos the king, according to the law.

This decree shall be inscribed on a stela of hard stone in sacred [that is hieroglyphic] and native [that is 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.

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