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978-1-108-01716-9 - An Account of Some Recent Discoveries in Hieroglyphical Literature and Egyptian Antiquities

Thomas Young

Excerpt

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# DISCOVERIES

IN

## HIEROGLYPHICAL LITERATURE.

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### CHAPTER I.

#### INTRODUCTORY SKETCH OF THE PREVALENT OPINIONS RESPECTING HIEROGLYPHICS.

THE Greeks and Romans, either from national pride, or from a want of philological talent, were extremely deficient in their knowledge of all such languages as they called barbarous, and they frequently made up for their ignorance by the positiveness of their assertions, with regard to facts which were created by their own imagination. It was very currently believed, on their authority, not only that Egypt was the parent of all arts and sciences, but that the hieroglyphical inscriptions, on its public monuments, contained a summary of the most important mysteries of nature, and of the most sublime inventions of man: but that the interpretation of these characters had been so studiously concealed by the priests, from the knowledge of the vulgar, and had indeed been so im-

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perfectly understood by themselves, that it was wholly lost and forgotten in the days of the later Roman Emperors. The story, however, of a reward, supposed to have been offered in vain by one of the first of the Caesars, for an interpretation of the inscription on an obelisc, then lately brought from Egypt to Rome, appears to rest on no authentic foundation.

Among the works of more modern authors, who had employed themselves in the study of the hieroglyphics, it is difficult to say whether those were the more discouraging, which, like the productions of Father Kircher and the Chevalier Palin, professed to contain explanations of every thing, or which, like the ponderous volume of Zoëga on the Obeliscs, confessed, after collecting all that was really on record, that the sum and substance of the whole amounted absolutely to nothing.

Father Kircher's six folios contain some tolerably faithful, though inelegant, representations of the principal monuments of Egyptian art, which had before his days been brought to Europe: and, according to his interpretation, which succeeded equally well, whether he happened to begin at the beginning, or at the end, of each of the lines, they all contain some mysterious doctrines of religion or of metaphysics. With equal sagacity, but with much less appearance of laborious research, the Chevalier Palin, beginning, in one instance at least, by way of variety, in the middle, has more

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recently discovered, that Hebrew translations of many of the Egyptian consecrated rolls of papyrus are to be found, in the Bible, under the name of the Psalms of David. Whatever may be thought of the judgment of these antiquaries, their opinions are not particularly discreditable to their talents and ingenuity: for having once allowed themselves to set out with the mistaken notion, that it was possible to determine the sense of the hieroglyphics, by internal evidence and by the force of reasoning only, the imperfections of their superstructures were the unavoidable consequences of the unsubstantial nature of the foundations, on which they were raised.

There was indeed a traditional record of the true sense of one single character, denoting LIFE, which had been handed down by the ecclesiastical writers, and had been generally received as correct by scholars and antiquaries: although I cannot help suspecting that Sir Archibald Edmonstone's memory deceives him when he remarks, that the same symbol is often substituted, in Christian inscriptions, for the simpler sign of the cross, with which they more commonly begin. We also find some imperfect hints of a partial knowledge of the sense of the hieroglyphics in the puerile work of Horapollo, which is much more like a collection of conceits and enigmas than an explanation of a real system of serious literature: and while such scattered truths were

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confounded with a multitude of false assertions, it was impossible to profit by any of them, without some clue to assist us in the selection. For my own part, if I had ever read of the true signification of the handled cross, it had entirely escaped my recollection.

The French expedition to Egypt was most liberally provided, by the government of the day, with a select body of antiquaries, and architects, and surveyors, and naturalists, and draughtsmen, whose business it was to investigate all that was interesting to science or to literature in that singular country. Their labours have been made public, with all the advantages of chalcographical and typographical elegance, in the splendid collection, entitled *Description de l'Égypte*. But it is scarcely too much to say, that the only real benefit, conferred on Egyptian literature, by that expedition, was the discovery of a huge broken block, of black stone, in digging for the foundations of Fort St. Julian, near Rosetta, which the British army had afterwards the honour of bringing to this country, as a proud trophy of their gallantry and success. It is not to a want of ability, nor of industry, nor of accuracy, nor of fidelity, in the Egyptian Commission, that so total a failure is to be attributed; but partly to the real difficulty of the subject, and still more to the preconceived opinion, which was very generally entertained by their men of letters, of the exorbitant

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antiquity of the Egyptian works of art, which caused them to neglect the lights, that might have been derived, from a comparison of Greek and Roman inscriptions, with the hieroglyphics in their neighbourhood; and to suppose, that whatever bore the date of less than thirty or forty centuries must necessarily be an interpolation, unconnected with the original architecture and decorations of the edifice, to which it belonged: and when a strong prejudice has once been imbibed, we all know that the senses themselves are perpetually blunted and perverted by it, even without the consent of the reasoning powers. Mr. William Hamilton had, however, very successfully brought forwards a variety of evidence, in favour of the utility of the various inscriptions of the Greeks and Romans, for ascertaining the date of many of the buildings to which they belong; and the question, thus agitated between the French and the English travellers, had already assumed somewhat of a national character.

A cursory inspection of the Greek inscription, contained in the pillar of Rosetta, was sufficient to establish, as incontrovertible, the opinion, which had been very ably maintained by our acute and learned countryman Bishop Warburton, that the hieroglyphics, or sacred characters, were not so denominated, as being exclusively appropriated to sacred subjects, but that they constituted a real written language, applicable to the purposes of

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history and common life, as well as to those of religion and mythology; since this inscription speaks of the three divisions of the pillar, as containing different versions of the same decree, in the sacred and the vulgar character, and in the Greek language, respectively: and, that there was no fraud in this description, was at once made evident by the just observation of Akerblad, who pointed out, at the end of the hieroglyphical inscription, the three first numerals, indicated by I, II, and III, respectively, where the Greek has “the first and the second ...”; the end being broken off. It was also evident, that the hieroglyphical language continued to be understood and employed in the time of Ptolemy Epiphanes: but here the matter rested for several years; no single representation of an existing object having been so identified, on this or any other monument among the hieroglyphics, as to have its signification determined, even by a probable conjecture.

In the mean time, the enterprising and enlightened Baron Alexander Von Humboldt was contributing to illustrate the nature of hieroglyphical languages, by his account of the Mexican drawings, contained in his Views of the Cordilleras and Monuments of the American nations. The symbols, however, of the Americans appear to have had little or nothing in common with those of the Egyptians. The written language of the Chinese, on the contrary, exhibits, in some cases,

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a much closer analogy with that of ancient Egypt: and Mr. Barrow, by his clear and concise explanation of the peculiar nature of the Chinese characters, has contributed very materially to assist us in tracing the gradual progress of the Egyptian symbols through their various forms; although the resemblance is certainly far less complete than has been supposed by Mr. Palin, who tells us, that we have only to translate the Psalms of David into Chinese, and to write them in the ancient character of that language, in order to reproduce the Egyptian papyri, that are found with the mummies.

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## CHAPTER II.

### INVESTIGATIONS FOUNDED ON THE PILLAR OF ROSETTA.

THE pillar of Rosetta was now safely and quietly deposited in the British Museum; the Society of Antiquaries had engraved, and very generally circulated, a correct copy of its three inscriptions; and several of the best scholars of the age, in particular Porson and Heyne, had employed themselves in completing and illustrating the Greek text, which constituted the third part of the inscription: and it so happened that, although no person acquainted with both these critics could hesitate to give the general preference, for acuteness of observation, and felicity of conjecture, and soundness of judgment, to the English professor, yet in this instance the superior industry and vigilance of the German had given him decidedly the advantage, with respect to two or three passages, in which their translations happen to differ.

But Greek was already sufficiently understood, both in London and at Gottingen, to make this part of the investigation comparatively insignificant. Mr. Akerblad, a diplomatic gentleman,



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then at Paris, but afterwards the Swedish resident at Rome, had begun to decipher the middle division of the inscription; after De Sacy had given up the pursuit as hopeless, notwithstanding that he had made out very satisfactorily the names of Ptolemy and Alexander. But both he and Mr. Akerblad proceeded upon the erroneous, or, at least imperfect, evidence of the Greek authors, who have pretended to explain the different modes of writing among the ancient Egyptians, and who have asserted very distinctly that they employed, on many occasions, an alphabetical system, composed of twenty five letters only. The characters of the second part of the inscription being called in the Greek ENCHORIA GRAMMATA, or letters of the country, it was natural to look among these for the alphabet in question: and Mr. Akerblad, having principally deduced his conclusions from the preamble of the decree, which consists in great measure of foreign proper names, persisted, to the time of his death, in believing, that this part of the inscription was throughout alphabetical. I have called these characters enchoric, or rather *enchorial*: Mr. Champollion has chosen to distinguish them by the term *demotic*, or popular; perhaps from having been in the habit of employing it before he was acquainted with the denomination which I had appropriated to them: in my opinion, the priority of my publication ought to have induced him to adopt my term, and to suppress his own, rather than to add an-

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other useless synonym, for what the ancients, when speaking with accuracy, would probably have described as the “epistolographic” form of writing employed by the Egyptians: for we have no means of determining the precise nature of the characters called *popular* by Herodotus.

Mr. Akerblad was far from having completed his examination of the whole enchorial inscription, apparently from the want of some collateral encouragement or cooperation, to induce him to continue so laborious an inquiry; and he had made little or no effort to understand the first inscription of the pillar, which is professedly engraved in the sacred character, except the detached observation, respecting the numerals at the end: he was even disposed to acquiesce in the correctness of Mr. Palin’s interpretation, which proceeds on the supposition, that parts of the first lines of the hieroglyphics are still remaining on the stone.

It was natural to expect, that, after the possibility of a partial success, in this part of the undertaking, had been almost demonstrated by what Mr. Akerblad had cursorily observed, the critics and chronologists of all civilised countries would have united, heart and hand, in a common effort to obtain a legitimate solution of all the doubts and difficulties, in which the early antiquities of Egypt had long remained involved. But, excepting Mr. Champollion and myself, they have all chosen to amuse themselves with