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Thomas Young

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An Account of Some Recent Discoveries in Hieroglyphical Literature and Egyptian Antiquities

Thomas Young (1773–1829) was an English physician who was one of the first modern scholars to attempt to decipher ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, and made significant contributions to a variety of other academic disciplines. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1794 and in 1803 published an article establishing the wave theory of light. Young became interested in hieroglyphs in 1814, when he was sent a fragment of papyrus from Egypt. After acquiring a copy of the Rosetta Stone inscriptions, Young made rapid progress, publishing his results in 1816 and 1819. When Champollion published his famous work on hieroglyphs in 1822, Young believed that this had been based, without acknowledgement, on his own earlier translations, which Champollion denied. This book was published in 1823 in an attempt by Young to lay 'public claim to whatever credit be my due', and provides a summary of his hieroglyphic research.

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*Including the Author's Original Alphabet,
as Extended by Mr. Champollion, with a
Translation of Five Unpublished Greek and
Egyptian Manuscripts*

THOMAS YOUNG



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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108017169

© in this compilation Cambridge University Press 2010

This edition first published 1823

This digitally printed version 2010

ISBN 978-1-108-01716-9 Paperback

This book reproduces the text of the original edition. The content and language reflect the beliefs, practices and terminology of their time, and have not been updated.

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AN ACCOUNT
OF
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IN
HIEROGLYPHICAL LITERATURE,
AND
EGYPTIAN ANTIQUITIES.

INCLUDING
THE AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL ALPHABET,
AS EXTENDED BY MR. CHAMPOLLION,
WITH A
TRANSLATION OF FIVE UNPUBLISHED GREEK AND
EGYPTIAN MANUSCRIPTS.

BY THOMAS YOUNG, M. D. F. R. S.

FELLOW OF THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS.

LONDON:

JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET.

1823.

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TO ALEXANDER BARON VON HUMBOLDT,

AS A MARK OF THE HIGHEST RESPECT,

FOR THE EXTENT OF HIS KNOWLEDGE

AND THE ACCURACY OF HIS RESEARCH,

AS WELL AS

FOR HIS ARDENT ZEAL IN THE PROMOTION OF SCIENCE,

AND FOR HIS CANDOUR AND VIGILANCE

IN THE DISTRIBUTION OF LITERARY JUSTICE,

THIS WORK IS DEDICATED

BY HIS OBLIGED FRIEND,

THE AUTHOR.

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VOLVENDA DIES EN ATTULIT ULTRO!

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P R E F A C E.

A COMPLETE confirmation of the principal results, which I had some years since deduced, from an examination of the hieroglyphical monuments of ancient Egypt, having been very unexpectedly derived from the ulterior researches of Mr. Champollion, and from the singular good fortune of Mr. George Grey, I cannot resist the natural inclination, to make a public claim to whatever credit may be my due, for the labour that I have bestowed, on an attempt to unveil the mystery, in which Egyptian literature has been involved for nearly twenty centuries.

If, indeed, I have not hitherto wholly withheld from the public the results of my inquiries, it has not been from the love of

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authorship only, nor from an impatience of being the sole possessor of a secret treasure ; but because I was desirous of securing, at least, for my country, what is justly considered as a desirable acquisition to every country, the reputation of having enlarged the boundaries of human knowledge, and of having contributed to extend the dominion of the mind of man over time, and space, and neglect, and obscurity. *Corona in SACRIS CERTAMINIBUS non victori datur, sed PATRIA ab eo coronari pronuntiatur.* And whatever vanity or enthusiasm there might be in this sentiment, it was at least sincere and unaffected.

In the mean time my Egyptian investigations had been as laborious as they had been persevering : and like many other pursuits, in which I have been engaged, they had been so little enlivened by any fortunate coincidences, or unexpected facilities, that having occasion to adopt a motto for the sig-

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natures of some anonymous communications, I had chosen the words FORTUNAM EX ALIIS, as appropriate to my own history. But the new lights, which Mr. Champollion has obtained, and the marvellous accident of the existence of a Greek manuscript, in perfect preservation, which I found, when Mr. Grey had obligingly left it for my examination, to be the translation of a unique hieroglyphic papyrus, lately purchased by the King of France; these circumstances have so far changed the complexion of my literary adventures, that if I remained any longer in masquerade, I should certainly be compelled to adopt the character of POLYCRATES or of ALADDIN.

It would indeed have been a little hard, that the only single step, which leads at once to an extensive result, should have been made by a Foreigner, upon the very ground which I had undergone the drudgery of quietly raising, while he advanced rapidly

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and firmly, without denying his obligations to his predecessor, but very naturally, under all circumstances, without exaggerating them, or indeed very fully enumerating them. I should not have repined, even if no counterpart to his good fortune had occurred for my own advantage and assistance ; but the exhilaration of a success, so unexpected, has brought me more immediately and more openly before the public, than it was previously my intention to appear, in relation to a pursuit so remote from the nature of many other duties which I am bound to fulfil.

It may naturally be expected that I should make some apology, for what is generally considered as a violation of professional decorum ; for presuming to appear again before the public, without absolute necessity, in any other capacity than that of a practical physician. I have indeed myself observed, on a former occasion, that the public is inclined to think, and not with-

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out something like reason, that the abilities of different individuals are pretty nearly equal; and that if any one has distinguished himself in a particular department of study, he must have bestowed so much the less time and attention on other departments: that, of course, if he excelled in more than one line, out of his profession, the natural inference would be so much the stronger: and that whether this may be fair or not, it is at least fair, that direct evidence should be produced or imagined of a devotion to medical pursuits, before medical confidence can reasonably be expected.

My explanation then is, that I consider myself as having already produced to the public *more than sufficient* “evidence” of my claim to this “medical confidence”; and that, having now acquired the right to celebrate a YEAR OF JUBILEE, I think myself fully justified in endeavouring, without further regard to the strict etiquette of my profession, to obtain, while I have yet a few

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years more to live and to learn, whatever respect may be thought due to the discoveries, which have constituted the amusement of a few of my leisure hours.

In addition to this apology, perhaps already too long, I will venture to state, as a matter of anecdote, the train of occurrences that has accidentally led me to engage in these pursuits. To begin therefore with the beginning, or rather before the beginning, as the subject of a preface may very naturally do: I had been induced by motives both of private friendship, and of professional obligation, to offer, to the editors of a periodical publication, an article, which I thought would be of some advantage to their collection, containing an abstract of Adelung's Mithridates, a work then lately received from the continent. In reading this elaborate compilation, my curiosity was excited by a note of the editor, Professor Vater, in which he asserted that the unknown language of the Stone of

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Rosetta, and of the bandages often found with the mummies, was capable of being analysed into an alphabet consisting of little more than thirty letters: but having merely retained this general impression, I thought no more of these inscriptions, until they were recalled to my attention, by the examination of some fragments of a papyrus, which had been brought home from Egypt by my friend Sir William Rouse Boughton, then lately returned from his travels in the East. With this accidental occurrence my Egyptian researches began: their progress and termination will be the subject of the present volume.

T. Y.

*Welbeck Street,
1 March, 1823.*

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WORKS OF THE AUTHOR;

TO BE HAD OF THE PUBLISHER.



1. **A Course of Lectures on Natural Philosophy and the Mechanical Arts**, 2 vols. 4to. 1807.
2. **An Introduction to Medical Literature, including a System of Practical Nosology**, 8vo. Second edition, 1823.
3. **A Practical and Historical Treatise on Consumptive Diseases**, 8vo. 1815.
4. **Elementary Illustrations of the Celestial Mechanics of Laplace**, 8vo. 1821.