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Jean-François CHAMPOLLION

*A Manuscript for the History of Ancient Egypt*

Suggested to have been written in Turin, Italy, between July and December, 1824; edited and revised before 1826

Paper and ink

23.6 cm x 18.5 cm

FGA-ARCH-EG-0531

### Geographic origin

Turin, Italy

### Provenance

Acquired on the European art market in the 1990's.

### Bibliography

CHAPPAZ, Jean-Luc, « Jean-François Champollion », in CHAPPAZ, J.-L., CHAMAY, J., *Reflets du divin: antiquités pharaoniques et classiques d'une collection privée* [Catalogue d'exposition, Genève, Musée d'art et d'histoire, 30.8.2001-3.2.2002], Genève, Musée d'art et d'histoire, 2001, pp. 127-129, n° 120.

BIANCHI, Robert Steven, "La collection d'archéologie de la Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève", in MÉLA, Ch., MÖRI, Fr. (éds), *Alexandrie la divine* [Catalogue d'exposition, Cologny, Fondation Martin Bodmer, 5 avril - 31 août 2014], Genève, 2014, vol. I, p. 36-37, fig. 3.

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*The Fondation Gandur pour l'Art in Partnership with the Musée de Normandie at the Château de Caen*

This manuscript by Jean-François Champollion (1790-1832) is among the objects on loan from the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art to the special exhibition, *Voyage en Égypte au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, which opened at the Musée de Normandie at the Château de Caen on June 23, 2017, for which see this link:

([http://musee-de-normandie.caen.fr/expositions\\_evenements](http://musee-de-normandie.caen.fr/expositions_evenements))

We present it here in order to place Champollion's epoch-making decipherment of the ancient Egyptian language into the context of the European reception of ancient Egypt because his decipherment ran counter to the prevailing symbolist approach to the hieroglyphs.

*The Symbolist Approach to the Hieroglyphs*

By AD 450 the last individuals schooled in the ancient Egyptian language had died, taking to their graves the secret of the hieroglyphs, the nature of which was subsequently often grossly misunderstood by classical authors and early Church Fathers. Some of those individuals regarded the Egyptian hieroglyphs as symbols encrypting coded knowledge, which had to be interpreted, metaphorically, rather than translated as a language<sup>1</sup>. This symbolist approach to the hieroglyphs was reinforced by the contents of the *Hieroglyphica*, reputedly written in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD by Horapollon Niliacus, Cristoforo Bundelmonti discovered a copy of which, in Greek, on the Greek Aegean island of Andros in 1419<sup>2</sup>. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, most European intellectuals espoused this symbolic nature of the hieroglyphs which became enshrined with the appearance in 1643 of the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher's *Lingua Aegyptiaca Restituta*<sup>3</sup>. It is important, therefore, to understand that Champollion was born into an intellectual climate prejudiced by this erroneous, symbolic understanding of the true nature of the hieroglyphs, and that his work

was colored by his acceptance of this mistaken assumption until 14 September 1822<sup>4</sup>. On that day, he is reported to have exclaimed, "Je tiens mon affaire!" when he realized by his own autopsy of

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<sup>1</sup> IVERSEN, "The Hieroglyphic Tradition", p. 170-196.

<sup>2</sup> BOAS, *The Hieroglyphs of Horapollon*, p. xvi.

<sup>3</sup> KUNZE, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> ZIEGLER, 1982.



squeezes of inscriptions from the Temple of Rameses II at Abu Simbel that some of the hieroglyphs were phonetic, others ideographic. Within days of that *eureka moment* he penned his now-famous *Lettre à Monsieur Dacier*<sup>5</sup>, which destroyed the establishment's fourteen hundred year old symbolist theory, replacing it with one based upon more linguistic rigor.

#### *Developing a Chronology for the History of Ancient Egypt*

Having accurately deciphered the hieroglyphs, Champollion then resolved to study those inscribed Egyptian monuments to which he had access. He traveled to Turin, Italy, to spend several months in the Museo Egizio, where more than 5,000 objects, acquired by Bernardino Drovetti (1776-1852), had been recently inventoried. One of his primary objectives was to study royal inscriptions containing the names of the pharaohs, which he hoped to correlate with the royal names recorded by classical authors writing in Greek and Latin.

#### *Champollion and the Duke de Blacas d'Aulps (1771-1839)*

He communicated the results of this research at Turin between July and December 1824 to Duke de Blacas d'Aulps (1771-1839)<sup>6</sup>. The Duke was an important supporter of Champollion and fostered his career by nominating Champollion to the position of curator of Egyptian and Ancient Near Eastern Antiquities at Musée Charles X at the Louvre, which was to open in 1826. Champollion initially wrote this manuscript during his stay in Turin. One can clearly see his edited revisions and comments, added at a later date, in lighter colored ink. His intentions were to use the edited manuscript as the ultimate source of the cartouches illustrated on Plate VIII bis of his 1826 publication<sup>7</sup>.

#### *The contents of FGA-ARCH-EG-0531*

Deleting information which was not to appear on that plate, he added notes on the numbering of the texts where he recorded six inscriptions numbered C to H, the first three of which relate to pharaohs of Dynasty XVII and the last three to those of Dynasty XVIII. Champollion's hand-copy of each of the six inscriptions is accompanied by his translation, a note about the source of the

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<sup>5</sup> CHAMPOLLION, *Lettre à M. Dacier*.

<sup>6</sup> CHAMPOLLION, *Lettres à M. le Duc de Blacas d'Aulps. Première lettre, 1824*.

<sup>7</sup> CHAMPOLLION, *Lettres à M. le Duc de Blacas d'Aulps. Seconde Lettre, 1826, plate VIII bis*.



inscription, and his dating of each to a specific pharaoh or dynasty. It is, therefore, of interest to compare this edited manuscript with that plate, because such a comparison reveals how Champollion was formulating his ideas.

One must understand that the discipline of Egyptology was in its infancy during this period of time so that a modern scholar should not be too dismayed by the observation that Champollion placed Pharaoh Amenemhet III into Dynasty XVII rather than into Dynasty XII and Pharaoh Sety I into Dynasty XVIII rather than into Dynasty XIX. In all fairness Champollion based his chronology on his blind acceptance of the accuracy of the so-called Kings' List which he consulted at Turin as well as that at Abydos, which, although compiled during the Nineteenth Dynasty, is itself somewhat misleading, because it was anciently issued as political propaganda<sup>8</sup>. So, for example, that Kings' List purposefully excluded the names of pharaohs who either usurped the throne or were foreigners. The List then jumps from the last pharaoh of Dynasty XII to the first pharaoh of Dynasty XVIII, passing over in silence all of those who ruled in between. The Kings' List also purposefully omits listing the heretic pharaoh Akhenaten and his immediate successors, all of whom ruled during the closing years of Dynasty XVIII.

### *The Legacy of Champollion*

Nevertheless, plates such as this one in Champollion's publication laid the foundations of modern Egyptology and formed a crucial first step in sorting out the often-complex intricacies of the chronology of ancient Egypt<sup>9</sup>. To his credit, Champollion realized that reconstructing that chronology required the study of the largest corpus of historical inscriptions possible. At the time of his work, that corpus was very limited indeed, but Champollion had nevertheless realized the importance of such inscriptions. Henceforth philology was and still is recognized as the single most important area of study within the field of Egyptology.

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<sup>8</sup> RYHOLT, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> CHAMPOLLION, *Lettres à M. le Duc de Blacas d'Aulps. Seconde Lettre*, 1826.



### *Champollion and the City of Geneva*

We end this notice with the observation that Champollion visited the city of Geneva in October 1826, the year after he revised the manuscript under discussion. While here, he compiled his *Catalogue manuscrit des antiquités égyptiennes de Genève*, which describes four papyri, nine stelae, and fifteen bronze objects in the collections of this city's Musée d'Art et d'Histoire de Genève. This manuscript was discovered among the papers of Edouard Naville, as reported and published by Henri Wild<sup>10</sup>. We are, therefore, pleased to be able to add this manuscript by Jean-François Champollion, the Father of Egyptology, to that just mentioned. In so doing we gain the added satisfaction of recognizing the interconnections among Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Jean-François Champollion, the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire de Genève, and the City of Geneva.

Dr Robert Steven Bianchi

Curator in chief / Curator Antiquity Collection

Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, July 2017

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<sup>10</sup> WILD, 1972.



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