



The Rosetta Stone

E.A. Wallis Budge

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E.A. Wallis Budge was an English philologist and writer who worked for the British museum. Budge wrote a lot on the ancient East after taking multiple trips to Egypt and the Sudan.

Until about 200 years ago the writing of the ancient Egyptians was an enigma to the world, but that changed when an ancient Egyptian monument known today as the Rosetta Stone was discovered (or rediscovered serendipitously) by French soldiers in Egypt in 1799. Now one of the most famous monuments in the world, the Rosetta Stone is a black granite stela that was inscribed with texts in Greek and two different scripts of the ancient Egyptian language: demotic and hieroglyphs. Stelae like the Rosetta Stone were monuments that ancient Egyptian kings inscribed texts on, usually to proclaim a battle victory or a legal decree. Since the kings who commissioned stelae to be built believed that the information they contained were important, they were usually large, as is the case with the Rosetta Stone. Although damaged over time, the Rosetta Stone still stands nearly four feet tall and over two feet wide, and it originally stood probably between five and six feet tall (Andrews 1982, 12). The discovery of the Rosetta Stone finally provided researchers with a way of reading the Egyptian language based on an understanding of the Greek translation. The texts on the Rosetta Stone were written during the reign of Ptolemy V in 196 B.C. Ptolemy V was descended from Ptolemy Lagos, who took control of Egypt after the death of his close friend, Alexander the Great, in 323 BC (Lloyd 2000, 396). Like their pharaonic Egyptian predecessors, the Ptolemies ruled Egypt as a royal dynastic family, and as time went on they even assumed the traditional royal Egyptian titles of kingship. Although not one of the most important of the Ptolemaic rulers, Ptolemy V's reign was important for a couple of reasons. Most of his rule was marked by rebellion of the native Egyptians against their Greek overlords; no matter what the Ptolemies did to try to appear as Egyptians, they were still viewed as foreign by many who wanted to restore a native born ethnic Egyptian dynasty to power. A native Egyptian named Ankhwenefre led the rebellion against Ptolemy V, but it ultimately failed and was suppressed in 186 B.C. (Chauveau 2000, 11). The Rosetta Stone, which conferred benefits to the native Egyptian priests, was commissioned 10 years later by the king in order to appease the important religious class (Lloyd 2000, 415). Other than suppressing that rebellion and commissioning the Rosetta Stone, Ptolemy V is perhaps best known for having Cleopatra I as his queen. Cleopatra I was the first of seven Ptolemaic women to have that name, and like her best known descendant, Cleopatra VII, she also briefly exercised sole rule over Egypt. The historical importance of the Rosetta Stone as a primary source of events during a turbulent period in Egyptian history cannot be minimized, but its true importance was as a tool that scholars used to unlock the language of ancient Egypt. This was not lost on the Europeans at all, as the discovery and subsequent translation of the Rosetta Stone not only opened the door for the development of modern Egyptology but also proved to be an important chapter during the period known as the Enlightenment.

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