

THE ROSETTA STONE

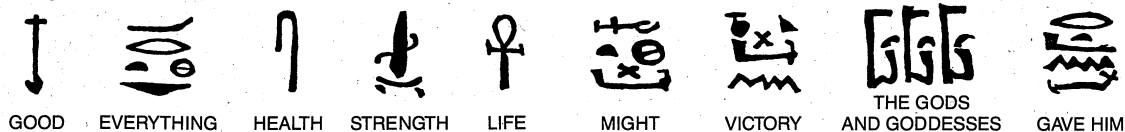
Egyptian Decree, 196 B.C.

For hundreds of years one of the world's greatest mysteries could be found on the walls of the pyramids and monuments of ancient Egypt. On these walls Egyptians had carved hieroglyphics, a system of writing that used pictures and signs to stand for objects, sounds, and ideas. At a later time Egyptians had carved another system of writing known as demotic, which used an alphabet to stand for sounds. What did these symbols mean? For years no one knew what they meant because the knowledge of how to read hieroglyphics and demotic writing had been lost.

But in 1799 archaeologists made a remarkable discovery. In the Egyptian town of Rosetta they found a piece of stone marked with carvings in three languages: hieroglyphics, demotic, and Greek. The Rosetta Stone appears in the inset on the facing page. Using their knowledge of Greek, scholars soon learned that the stone recorded the same information in the three different languages. The translation of the Rosetta Stone provided a valuable key for unlocking the secrets of ancient Egypt.

What did the markings on the Rosetta Stone say? It was an order given by a pharaoh named Ptolemy Epiphanes in 196 B.C., demanding that priests in Egypt honor him and accept him as their ruler. To make sure that everyone would obey this order, the pharaoh had it carved in three different languages.

Reading hieroglyphic symbols, or hieroglyphs, is like trying to solve a puzzle. Look at the sentence below taken from the Rosetta Stone. The meaning of each hieroglyph is given below it in English. Try to put the hieroglyphs together to make a sentence.

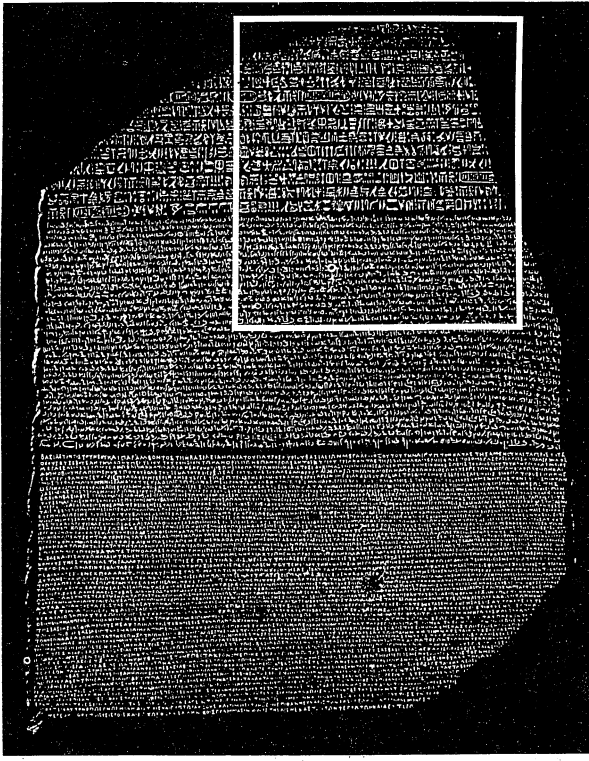


This sentence appears on the facing page in the enlargement of the top right section of the Rosetta Stone. It is in the line beside the arrow. Can you find it? In English, this sentence reads: "The gods and goddesses have given him [Pharaoh] victory, might, strength, health, and every other good thing." You can use some of these symbols to decode other hieroglyphs as well. For example, you already know the symbol for life, which appears above. The symbol for eternal, shown below, is a snake. When these two symbols appear together, they mean eternal life. See if you can find this phrase on the next page. Notice that by combining symbols you can make longer phrases. Look at the symbols for day, seven, and ten. Now see if you can find the phrase 17 days on the Rosetta Stone. Try to locate the other symbols and phrases explained below. What do you suppose that the other hieroglyphs on the Rosetta Stone might mean?



Hieroglyphic text from the Rosetta Stone, arranged in horizontal columns. The script is a mix of hieroglyphs and Demotic characters. An arrow on the right points to the right, indicating the reading direction.

Hieroglyphic text on the left side of the page, continuing the columns from the top section.



Hieroglyphic text on the right side of the page, continuing the columns from the top section.

Thanks to the Rosetta Stone, people can now read hieroglyphic writing to learn about life in ancient Egypt. To find out about one of the most important Egyptian leaders in history, read the next document on page 14.