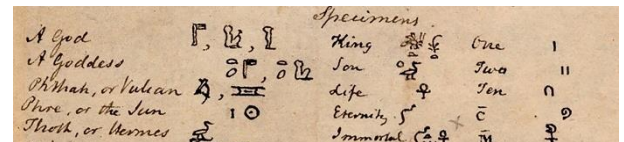# The British Museum

The British Academy

Scribal statue of Pesshuper. British Museum EA1514

Decipherments, archaeology, and early civilizations
John Baines, Oxford University

This paper is intended in part as an introduction to themes of the colloquium as a whole. The nineteenth-century decipherments of ancient scripts complemented renewed and increasing interest in the material record of the civilizations in question. That increase had accelerated during the eighteenth century and had led to a remarkable diffusion of visual evidence, whereas narratives about the civilizations remained largely tied to biblical, Greek, and Roman textual sources. An analogous, perhaps unavoidable pattern of development can be seen for later decipherments. A marked difference between the two groups is in the initial emergence of archaeology as a discipline during the phase of the earlier decipherments. The later group, which opened up the study of civilizations with few or no existing European narratives, includes examples where archaeology and anthropology influenced the expectations of what would be learned from texts. For the earlier group, emancipation from existing narratives was slow and may never be complete. In all cases, continuing research is tending to reunite texts with their physical support and surrounding material culture. For both groups of newly read scripts, the worlds revealed through access to texts were very different from those predicted beforehand. That unpredictability demonstrates the enormous importance of decipherment.

Part of a letter by Thomas Young to William John Bankes' father; containing instructions for checking inscriptions. British Museum, AESAr.387, vol. II, p. 3.

From Uruk to Susa: deciphering the earliest scripts in Western Asia
Jacob Dahl, University of Oxford

Similar to the early work on Late Uruk texts, earlier studies of the proto-Elamite tablets focused on identifying signs through comparisons with later cuneiform signs. However, whereas comparisons with later cuneiform signs bore some fruits for the understanding of the Late Uruk texts, the same was of course not true for proto-Elamite. Only with the improvement in the comprehension of early numerical systems and a structural comparison with the Late Uruk texts did the decipherment of proto-Elamite make progress. New work aimed at improving the state of the corpus using new images, as well as collaboration with

computational linguists, is greatly improving our understand-ing of proto-Elamite.

Clay tablet; record of barley; Late Uruk, 3300BC-3100BC. British Museum, 140853

The Medieval Arab Processors of Champollion
Okasha El Dali, Qatar University

Medieval Arab interest in the study of ancient Egypt and its scripts led to many attempts to decipher Egyptian hieroglyphs. Yet, nowhere in current published Egyptological literature do we see a recognition or investigation of the contributions made by medieval Arabic scholars to the decipherment of Egyptian scripts. In 1806, the Orientalist Joseph von Hammer published in London the full Arabic text and English translation of an incomplete copy of the Iraqi alchemist Ibn Wahshiyah's book on deciphering ancient scripts (ca 900 CE). He was among several medieval Arabic writers had succeeded in identifying some hieroglyphic letters. My brief survey of the available materials reveals wide use of Egyptian hieroglyphs by medieval Arab scholars and artists. The sources also show a continuous process of attempting to decipher Egyptian scripts including Demotic, which must have been much easier for medieval Arabs, as inscriptions in more than one script and language – Coptic/ Greek/Demotic – were still available and readable. It is interesting to note that nearly all the sources I refer to in this presentation were alchemists; many were also called Sufis or Mystics (e.g. Jabir ibn Hayyan, Dhu Al-Nun, Ibn Wahshiyah and Abu Al-Qasim Al-Iraqi). This may be due to the fame of ancient Egypt as the land of science, wisdom and mysticism.


Copy of a drawing in Abū al-Qāsim al-'Irāqī's The Book of the Seven Climes. British Library, Ms Add 25724, fol. 50v

Ahmed Kamal Pasha: A Pioneer Egyptian of Egyptology (1851-1923)
Azza Ezzat, Bibliotheca Alexandria

On the occasion of the 200-year anniversary of deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphs, it is essential to focus on significant Egyptologists who embarked on serious attempts to preserve the ancient Egyptian heritage. This paper is dedicated to Ahmed Kamal Pasha, who spent more than 20 years writing the *Lexique de la langue Egyptienne ancienne* which translated ancient Egyptian vocabulary to Arabic, then to French. It included 12,730 + 994 words, divided in 23 handwritten volumes, each focusing on a letter of the alphabet. The paper will highlight the achievements of Ahmed Kamal Pasha by presenting his own philosophy applied on his dictionary, in addition to presenting some unpublished documents related to his family, excavations, letters, royal decrees, the positions and salaries he had received, and the languages he was fluent in. Furthermore, the paper will end by presenting the stages accomplished by the restoration and digital labs in the Bibliotheca Alexandrina for conserving and digitizing the dictionary, by showing the implement-tation process of the chemical treatment and the theoretical studies of binding and sewing the manuscript until it had been digitised to make it accessible to researchers.
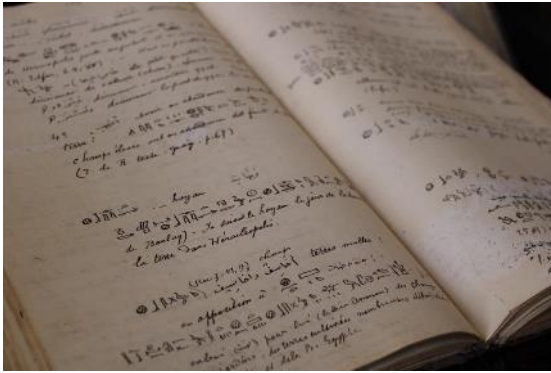
A page from Ahmed Kamal Pasha's Dictionary © Bibliotheca Alexandrina

Whose stories? Biographies in the tomb of Tutankhamun
Elizabeth Frood, University of Oxford

Among the objects bearing extended hierogly-phic inscriptions found in the burial chamber of the tomb of Tutankhamun are an ostrich feather fan and a reed staff. Their texts are biographical, relating events in the king's life, thus apparently within the range of traditional royal textual genres. However, they are object biographies as much as, or perhaps even more than, idealising celebrations of royal actions. In acknowledge-ment of a year of retellings of transformative moments for Egyptology – decipherment and the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun – this paper examines the micro-stories of text, image, and context for these two objects, and their implications for the analysis of comparable instances of ekphrasis across ancient Egyptian object worlds.

Ostrich feather fan from the tomb of Tutankhamun (© photograph by Harry Burton, courtesy of the Griffith Institute, Oxford)

Early accounting in the ancient Near East: computational methods to support decipherment
Kathryn Kelley, University of Bologna, INSCRIBE Project

Proto-Elamite and proto-cuneiform, two of the Near East's earliest scripts, are sister-systems that remain partially deciphered. Both are accounting technologies inscribed on clay tablets. Unlike some undeciphered writing systems, these are known in relatively large corpora, with c. 1500 and c. 6000 tablets respectively. Both are complex examples of "proto-writing" and may not contain significant amounts of language coding, although efforts continue to identify some phonetic coding within them. The size and complexity of these systems adds both promise and challenge to decipherment efforts, and thanks to good digital documentation and encoding, computer-aided analysis can significantly improve our understanding of the texts. This talk presents some recent results on the use of computational language models to identify interpretable patterns in this data.


Proto-Elamite clay tablet with five characters on one side. British Museum, 120486

Waste not, want not. Current work on ostraca from Athribis in Upper Egypt
Sandra Lippert, CNRS-PSL, Paris

Since 2005 an archaeological mission piloted by the university of Tübingen excavates the site of Hut-Repit/Athribis near Sohag in Upper Egypt. In spring 2018, a survey trench to the west of the temple built under Ptolemy XII cut into a vast dump containing large amounts of inscribed pottery sherds. The ongoing excavations have

since raised the total number of ostraca and amphora inscriptions to over 18.000, and more is still to be expected. Most of the sherds are inscribed in demotic (ca. 70%), the next largest group being Greek (ca. 15%). Surprisingly, several hundred contain hieratic and some dozens even hieroglyphic inscriptions; there are also numerous drawings of animals, persons, divinities, and objects. However, none of these are earlier than the late Ptolemaic period: most of them are contemporary to the phase of activity of the temple (1st c. BCE to 3rd c. CE), while some of the Greek, and obviously all of the (much rarer) Coptic and Arabic ones can be attributed to the late Byzantine/early Arab Middle Age, when the temple had been turned into a monastery. This paper will give an overview over the material, the information that can already be gleaned from it and the challenges our interdisciplinary research group faces in preparing its edition.
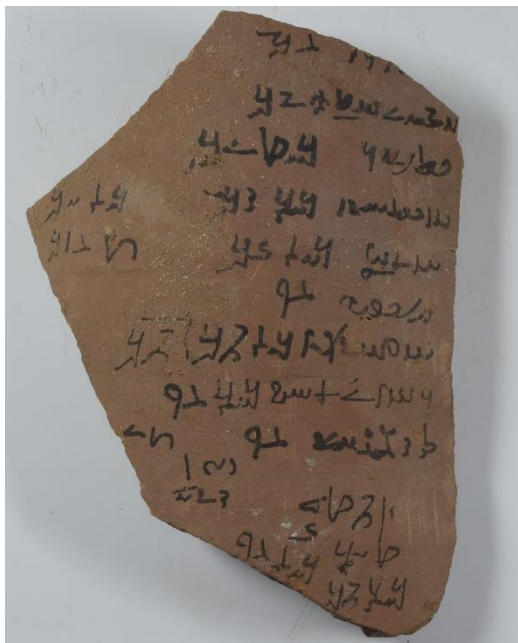
Account of money on an ostracon from Athribis, 1st c. BCE (ostracon no. 19-36-30/1873). Photo: Athribis-Projekt Tübingen

Linguistic and Cultural Translation in Trilingual Inscriptions (remote)
Rachel Mairs, University of Reading

Multilingual inscriptions from the ancient world served as the vehicles for transmission of specific messages between maker and audience, but also of ideas and world-views. The projects of translating language and translating culture are inextricably linked. Translators are faced with the task of rendering culture-specific ideas on religion, political ideology and social justice in ways that are comprehensible to their intended audiences in purely linguistic terms, but also in cultural terms. Trilingual inscriptions offer the opportunity to compare how multiple translators, in multiple languages, worked to convey the same message. This paper contextualises these questions in the Rosetta Stone and other Ptolemaic priestly decrees with reference to the Ezana inscriptions from Axum; the Great Inscription of Shapur I; and the Aśokan edicts from Old Kandahar.

Trilingual Inscription of Ezana from Axum, Ethiopia
Photo: Rachel Mairs

Deciphering the Rosetta Stone: a key to understanding Ptolemaic and early Roman rulership ideology
Martina Minas-Nerpel, University of Trier

When the Rosetta Stone was deciphered 200 years ago, scholars gradually found a direct way into understanding the ancient Egyptians. Their verbal expressions, complementing the archaeological evidence, also allow us to comprehend their political and religious thoughts and ideas, of which the rulership ideology is an essential part. It ensured the monarch's legitimate rule over the land by the Nile. This

paper will focus on certain phrases used in the synodal decrees, such as the inscriptions on the Rosetta Stone, and other Egyptian (and multilingual) inscriptions through to the early Roman period, including the Gallus victory stela. These texts were used eloquently to establish and secure foreign powers in Egypt and to construct an identity for their rule. These expressions, often based on age-old inscriptions going back to the New Kingdom or further, need to be analysed in their historical and archaeological contexts. Without the Egyptian textual evidence, Egyptian rulership ideology is almost impossible to comprehend in its details, perhaps even more so if the rulers in question were of foreign origin. Their rulership had intercultural dimensions that resulted also in new modes of self-presentation, in both textual and visual sources. The Rosetta Stone with its trilingual inscriptions was not only the key to deciphering the Egyptian hieroglyphs, but it was also, and continues to be, a key to comprehending and assessing the prestige and perception of the Ptolemaic dynasty.

Ashoka's inscriptions, James Prinsep, and the role of the enthusiast
Christopher Minkowski, University of Oxford

James Prinsep's decipherment of the Brahmi and Kharoshthi scripts in India between 1834 and 1837 can usefully be compared with Champollion's decipherment a decade earlier, in the method and context of the men's work, the impact of their discoveries, and their scholarly profiles. Prinsep's breakthroughs enabled the recovery of the history of Ashoka, the 3rd c. BC Mauryan emperor, through making legible the edicts that Ashoka had put up in stone across the kingdom. Yet Ashoka's only known large bilingual inscription, in Prakrit and Aramaic, came to light in Kandahar more than a hundred years after Prinsep's decipherments, as did one solely in Greek. A few 2nd c. BC bilingual coins in Greek and Prakrit were all that was known to Prinsep and his contemporary, Christian Lassen. Head of the Indian Mint in Calcutta, Prinsep was an amateur, as to some extent was Champollion, and both men died at only 41. As president of the Asiatick Society in Calcutta, however, Prinsep was at the centre of the study of Indic antiquities, the first to receive reports from British amateurs

and professional archaeologists working in the field. This talk will explore Prinsep's other activities and interests, as both scientist and artist, and compare his circuits of scholarly communication with those of Champollion.

The Canopic decree, also called the Caristie stela. Louvre, C 122.

The journey of the multilingual Amir Akhor stone, 1800-1830s
Hend Mohamed, Minya University

The excavation of trilingual stones was instrumental for the modern decipherment of Egyptian scripts. Although the Rosetta Stone is the most famous example, a large number of trilingual inscriptions and papyri played a role in this scholarly venture, but they were not available easily as they were subjected to the antiquities market and individual desires. The ancient stone whose modern history will be traced in this paper

carried many names: Caristie Stone, Burton tablet, and the threshold (slab) of Amir-Akhor Mosque. There are two stories of excavating the Amir-Akhor slab. The contest for owning the Amir-Akhor slab will be addressed as well as the why and how the Amir-Akhor slab came to the Louvre. Many issues related to the Amir-Akhor slab will be tackled, such as the habit of utilizing blocks with ancient Egyptian inscriptions as threshold in Mamluk and Ottoman constructions, and the procedures followed for applying and receiving certain antiquities under the reign of Mohamed Ali. Finally, there will be an attempt to follow the development of Egyptian perception for such trilingual stones.

From cabinet of curiosities to public museum: collecting Egyptian antiquities in Italy
Daniela Picchi, Museo Civico Archeologico, Bologna

From the mid-16th century onwards everything rare, curious, exotic, everything to marvel at, and thus Egyptian antiquities too, became a subject for erudite collecting for strictly personal or small scholarly circles in aristocratic houses. Italy had more curiosity collections than any other country and was, for this reason, more of a trailblazer than any other country in the not always coherent or sequential journey culminating in the modern museum concept. The author will introduce significant examples of the Italian journey that led from the Renaissance collecting of Egyptian antiquities to the opening of 19th-century public museums following the rediscovery of ancient Egypt and the deciphering of hieroglyphs.

Fake with a pseudo-hieroglyphic inscription, Museo Civico Archeologico, Bologna, EG 3707

The Book of the Temple and its multilingual and multiscriptal documentation (key-note)
Joachim Quack, University of Heidelberg

The Book of the Temple is a large manual for the ideal Egyptian temple, its architectural structure and how it should be run. The text is attested in about 50 different manuscripts, most of them unpublished. What makes this text so special is that it is not only transmitted in a single language. While the classical Egyptian version (in hieratic script) is the best attested, there are also several manuscripts documenting an intra-Egyptian translation into the demotic language. One manuscript from Oxyrhynchus shows a translation of at least one part of it even into Greek. Contrary to the best-known multilingual documents, like the decrees of the priestly synods, for the Book of the Temple most manuscripts contain just one version – there is only one papyrus where the hieratic as well as the demotic version is present. In my presentation, I will situate this composition in comparison to other cases of translations in Late-Period and Graeco-Roman Egypt.

Book of the Temple, Copenhagen Ti 004. Courtesy of the Papyrus Carlsberg Collection.

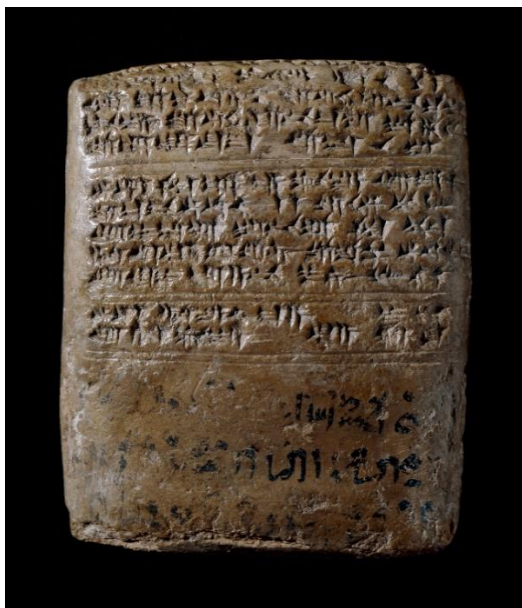## The Carbonized Papyri from Tanis and Thmuis
Kim Ryholt, University of Copenhagen

Very few papyri have been unearthed in the Egyptian Delta because of its humidity. The exception are several groups of carbonized papyri discovered at Bubastos, Tanis and Thmuis. My talk will focus on the papyri from the two latter sites and discuss their materiality and archaeological context, and not least their significance. It will (briefly) cover Howard Carter's first experience as a field director which almost led him to abandon archaeology.

Multilingualism and its near-absence in the written record: Egypt in contrast with Mesopotamia

Andréas Stauder, École Pratique des Hautes Études-PSL, Paris

Many languages, quite possibly representing a variety of linguistic groups and stocks, must have been spoken in late prehistoric times over the broad open space that was later to become "Egypt." Yet, indications for linguistic diversity in historical times are circumscribed. Moreover, Coptic is seen throughout Egypt four millennia later. This is all the more remarkable in view of the linguistic diversity seen in the written record of contemporary Mesopotamia. The contribution will discuss what can be said, and imagined, of the shifting linguistic geography of Egypt at the time of the earliest written documents and at later historical times. Parameters include the importance of mobile lifestyles in both prehistoric and historical times; the nature of Egyptian space, not an accretion zone like Mesopotamia; the role of court culture; the centrality of cultural models, including writing; the high prestige of Egyptian relative to other languages concurrently spoken; and the written diglossia that characterized the Egyptian domain from the New Kingdom on and is directly manifest notably on the Rosetta stone.
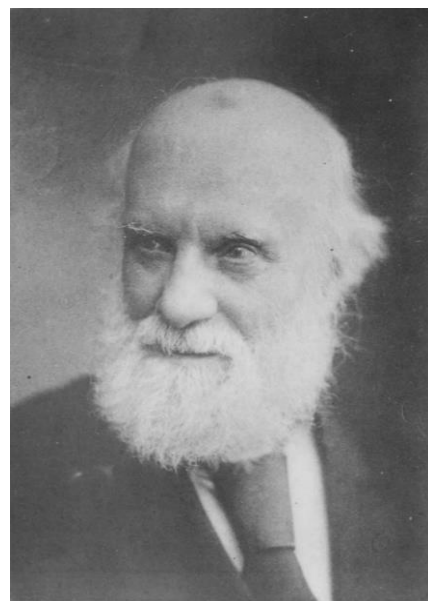
Between Champollion and the Berlin School: The forgotten sixty years of Egyptian linguistics

Sami Uljas, University of Uppsala, and Anne Landborg, independent researcher

Overviews of Egyptian-Coptic language studies usually focus on three separate periods of research history. Attempts to decode the Egyptian scripts prior to 1822 have received much attention, and the story of the decipherment of hieroglyphs by Champollion and the work of his contemporaries has been told numerous times. After this, the limelight has often shifted directly to the 1880's and to the achievements of Adolf Erman, Kurt Sethe, and other Berlin-based scholars, who indeed set Egyptological linguistics on a truly scientific track. However, the six decades between Champollion and the Berlin School of Erman et al. were not an empty space. Instead, that period saw busy investigation of the newly deciphered language, many hits and misses, and both cooperation and acrimonious disputes between scholars. The present paper will provide an historical and scientific overview of this 'lost' age of pioneers. It will serve as a reminder to modern students of Egyptian of why the work of scholars such as Samuel Birch, Amadeo Peyron, and Gustav Seyffarth deserves to be remembered or, in some cases, also forgotten.

Cuneiform tablet bearing a letter from Tushratta of Mitanni to Amenhotep III of Egypt. British Museum E29793


Samuel Birch (1813–1885), Keeper of Oriental Assyrian antiquities at the British Museum and the author of the first grammar on ancient Egyptian in English (1857).

What happened after the "decipherment" of the Anyang oracle texts?

Haicheng Wang, University of Washington, Seattle

Champollion's decipherment opened up a whole world: mute monuments that had been objects of fascination for centuries suddenly spoke. By contrast, the Anyang oracle texts were entirely unknown until about 1900, and once discovered, they could be read immediately, if only partly and haltingly. Champollion's ideas, crucial to the decipherment of cuneiform scripts, were not needed in China. The intellectual achievement was in no way comparable with his, and the Anyang inscriptional corpus was tiny by Egyptian standards. Nevertheless the oracle texts had enormous consequences for the study of the Chinese past. They were, for example, responsible for the Chinese adoption of western archaeology. In this paper I compare our steadily improving ability to read them with other decipherment stories. I conclude by describing a recent breakthrough that illustrates the complementary roles of texts and material culture in the study of the past.
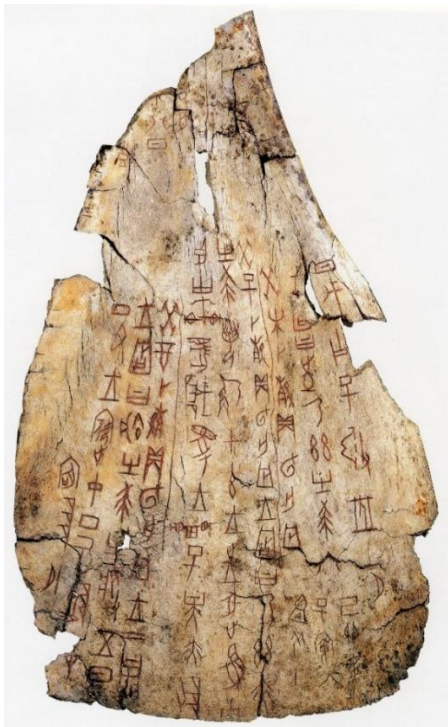
Inscribed ox scapula embellished with inlays of vermilion. From Anyang, reign of Wu Ding, c. 1200 BC. National Museum of China

Moving Beyond the Pictorial: The Ongoing Decipherment of a Mesoamerican Writing Tradition

Danny Zborover, British Museum

Between the 11th and 16th century CE, distinct literate societies throughout Mesoamerica became largely interconnected through a standardized pictorial writing system and related iconography. The British Museum—among other repositories in the UK—currently holds some of the best surviving examples of this scribal tradition, primarily known as the Mixteca-Puebla (or Nahua-Mixteca) style from central and southern Mexico. In this presentation I will describe the various Mesoamerican "Rosetta Stones" that played a key role in its initial decipherment, followed by case studies from the state of Oaxaca, where recent archaeological research corroborates, complements, and even contrasts with some of the territorial narratives recorded in this corpus. Today, as the Indigenous descendants continue to transform and employ this millenary tradition in the preservation of their heritage and lands, it is only through collaborative interdisciplinary research that we can hope to reach a truly culturally-grounded decipherment of these complex histories.

The Mixtec codex Tonindeye-Nuttall, British Museum Am1902,0308.1