

As readers of *Labyrinth* well know, the ancient past is often as much of an enigma as the distant future. It is not only that the societies of antiquity were often very foreign to our own; it is also simply that so much of what they thought or felt or did has been obscured by the passage of the centuries. The recovery of the past is a challenging and often daunting task when ancient civilizations are buried in the sands of time, and the keys to understanding them have been lost.

Some of those keys have always been with us, of course. For example, knowledge of the Greek and Latin languages has never been lost (though it must be admitted that there are still some rare words which baffle everyone!). But we have not been so fortunate with other languages and societies. We still cannot read the accounts which the Minoans of Crete left behind, in their 'Linear A' script. What language did they speak, and what thoughts did they record in it? We simply don't know.

But sometimes modern scholarship gets a real break in its efforts to unlock these civilizations, civilizations which may not be completely 'lost', but which are a mystery to us simply because we cannot read what they thought worth writing down. For well over a thousand years, the ability to read the great records of ancient Egypt—the so-called 'hieroglyphics'—was extinct. The writing system had gone into disuse, and ultimately, by the Christian era, there was simply no one left who could read it. It's true that some sporadic efforts were made: one scholar in the 18th century was quite convinced that Egyptian hieroglyphs were the same as Chinese writing (on the grounds that China had been an Egyptian colony!).

So if it had not been for a remarkably fortuitous discovery in the modern world, we can well imagine that the key to the great historical and religious legacy of Egypt might never have been found. When Napoleon Bonaparte's troops invaded Egypt, they may have shot the nose off the Sphinx, using it as target practice (or so the modern myth goes), but in another way they did Egyptology a great favour. In the midsummer of 1799, while digging the foundations for a fort near the ancient town of Rosetta in the western Delta, a group of French soldiers unearthed a slab of black basalt over a metre in height. On it had been inscribed an ancient decree, formulated by the Egyptian priesthood in honour of the young man who had been king of Egypt in the year 196 BC (the 27th of March, to be exact): Ptolemy V, or, to give him his titles as the inscription does, 'the

young king, the lord of crowns, whose glory is great, who established Egypt and is pious towards the gods, the conqueror of his enemies, who restored the life of men, the lord of the Thirty-Year festivals, like Ptah the Great, a king like Ra, the living image of Amon, Ptolemy the everliving, God manifest, beloved of Ptah...' Well, you get the picture.

In itself, the decree is not of outstanding significance. It is simply a 'thank you' to Ptolemy for his various benefactions, recording the offering to him of statues and shrines and honours from the priesthood. Many other similar decrees exist. But what does make the Rosetta Stone special is that this decree was recorded in three separate scripts: hieroglyphic at the top, demotic (another, simpler Egyptian script) in the middle, and at the bottom, Greek. Greek, of course, was Ptolemy's own language, since he was a descendant of Ptolemy I, that Ptolemy who had been a general of Alexander the Great and who had established himself as ruler of Egypt in 323 BC. For 300 years Egypt was ruled by the Ptolemaic dynasty, until Cleopatra, the last of the Ptolemies, was defeated by Rome. And since the ability to read *Greek* literature and inscriptions has never been lost, the Ptolemaic rule over Egypt (unpopular as it may have been among the contemporary Egyptians!) has proved to be vital to the scholastic recovery of the ancient Egyptian past.

When Napoleon's army was defeated, the Rosetta Stone was transferred to British ownership, one of the spoils of war (no one seems to have asked whether the Egyptians might want it). By 1802 it had found a home in the British Museum, where it may still be seen. But this was not an antiquity destined to be a simple tourist draw. It was a tool for use, and scholars went to work on it, recognizing immediately the crucial value of its bilingualism. Some headway was made by comparing the Greek text, and