

The Rosetta Stone

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Introduction

The Rosetta Stone is the most visited and famous antiquity on display at the British Museum (Ray, 2007, p. 1; Robinson, 2007, p. 46). The Rosetta Stone gained its fame as it was the key to decoding ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, allowing for scholars to further examine and understand other antiquities (Robinson, 2007, p. 46). Although the Rosetta Stone aided in further advancing the worlds' understanding of Egyptian hieroglyphics the stele also sparked an ethical conversation about the culturally appropriate display and legal ownership. This paper will examine the Rosetta Stones' discovery, its' physicality, and its' cultural contextual and ethical dilemmas, and argue for it to have a tripartite ownership agreement between the English, French, and Egyptian nations.

Physical Depiction

The Rosetta Stone is a granodiorite stele with three versions of a decree carved into it in Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic (top) and demotic (middle) scrips as well as ancient Greek (bottom) (Dalby et al., 2019, p. 1). The decree was carved into black granodiorite during the Hellenistic period on behalf of King Ptolemy V (Dalby et al., 2019, p. 1).

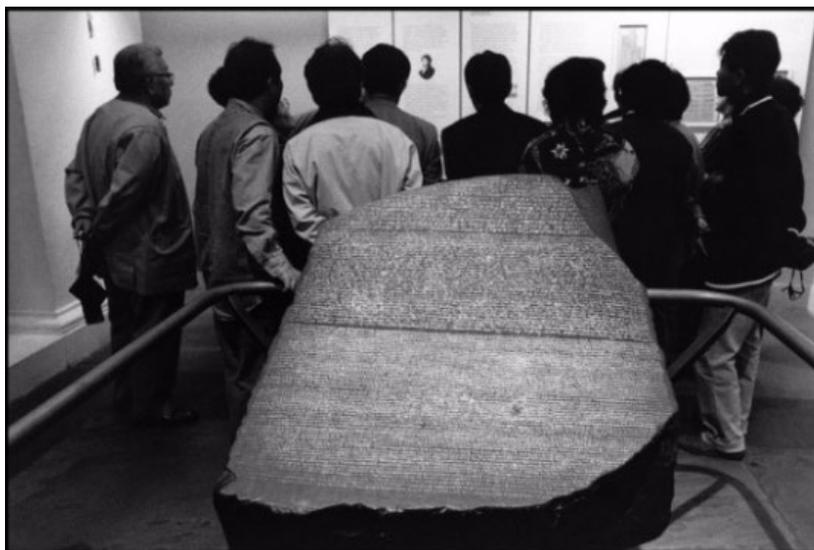


Figure 1: (Elliott, 1996).

The entire decree was not recovered and only a part of it remains. Eventually, the Rosetta stone became building material in the construction of Fort Julian near the town of Rashid (Rosetta) until it was unearthed and recovered by the French (Dalby et al., 2019, p. 1).

The Discovery

Although there are various accounts of the discovery of The Rosetta Stone, Wallis Budge (2012, p.4) offers his perspective. The Rosetta Stone was discovered in August 1799 by a French Officer of Engineers called Boussard (Wallis Budge, 2012, p.19). The Rosetta Stone's significance was immediately recognized by higher officers, and it was quickly realized that the Stone was of great importance (Wallis Budge, 2012, p.4; Ray, 2007, p.4). When the city of Alexandria eventually fell to British forces the French surrendered the antiquities which they had already collected, including the Rosetta Stone (Wallis Budge, 2012, p.20; Ray, 2007, p.4). The Rosetta Stone was seized as war booty by the British and today its' home is in London in the British Museum (Vercoutter, 1988; Ray, 2007, p.4).

The French had luckily taken rubbings and made several copies of the inscriptions on the Rosetta Stone and the race between the French and English began to decipher the mysterious writing (Vercoutter, 1988). The knowledge of hieroglyphic writing had died out as Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century AD and no one could read the inscribed texts on monuments or papyrus (Vercoutter, 1988). There was a competition between the French and the English to decipher the hieroglyphs first, and there are various accounts on who won the race. Ray (2007) recognizes the English individual Thomas Young as the first person to crack the code (p. 55), while Vercoutter (1988) recognizes Jean-Francois Champollion as the first person. Today, Jean-Francois Champollion is regarded as the founding father of Egyptology for his work in deciphering the Rosetta Stone's code (Vercoutter, 1988).

Ancient Context

The original purpose of the Rosetta Stone was to communicate a priestly decree- the Memphis Decree- concerning the cult religion of King Ptolemy V (Parkinson et al., 1999, p. 25). In ancient context, calling it the ‘Rosetta’ Stone would be misleading as the stone would have not been originally placed in the town of Rosetta when it was originally constructed (Parkinson et al., 1999, p. 26). The Rosetta stone was believed to have originally been part of a temple, possibly in Sais (Dalby et al., 2019, p. 1). It is probable that the stone was already broken when it was moved to the site of discovery as throughout Egyptian history statues and blocks of hard stone had been moved between sites in the Delta (Parkinson et al., 1999, p. 26).

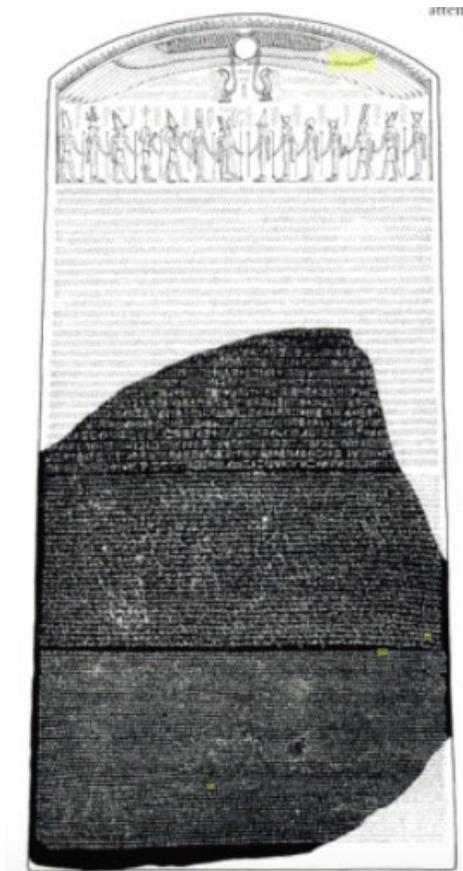


Figure 2: “A reconstruction of the original stela, based on other copies of the Memphis Decree and the Canopus Decree. Drawn by C. Thorne and R. Parkinson” (Parkinson et al., 1999, p. 26).

The context in which the Rosetta Stone was originally created is important when examining and attempting to understand it. It is extremely difficult to infer the meaning of an antiquity or symbol from simply the antiquity alone (Renfrew & Bahn, 2016, p. 392). It is much more efficient to examine the antiquity in the context in which it was created, as well as alongside other similar antiquities (Renfrew & Bahn, 2016, p. 392). Based upon other decrees that have been discovered from the same period, scholars are able to provide a more detailed and informed idea of what the stone probably originally looked like (Parkinson et al., 1999, p. 26). As depicted above almost half of the stone was broken off and lost, although the stela almost certainly had a round top with a scene depicting Egyptian style figures (Parkinson et al., 1999, p. 26). The usage and context of the Rosetta Stone changed significantly to the present day. While it was originally used as a religious decree (Parkinson et al., 1999, p. 25), it became the key to deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphics (Vercoutter, 1988; Ray, 2007, p. 44).

Contemporary Context

The Rosetta Stone was used in the early 1800s as a deciphering tool. Due to the stone being written in three languages it allowed for scholars to decipher Egyptian hieroglyphs (Wallis Budge, 2012, p. 9; Ray, 2007, p. 44). This was ground-breaking and led to the creation of Egyptology as a subject of study.

In modern times, The Rosetta Stone is on display at the British Museum in London in Room 4.



Figure 3: The Rosetta Stone on display in Room 4. (British Museum, 2017)

The stone is displayed free standing in a case of glass to prevent individuals from touching it. While the Rosetta Stone does have information posted on its' left and right, the placement of the stone does not reflect its' original context. The stone is displayed in a minimal fashion that without reading the information or looking closely to see the Egyptian hieroglyphics, it is not immediate to the viewer of what they are looking at. The Rosetta Stone is far removed from its' original cultural context. It is not surrounded by other Egyptian antiquities and there is no information on what the entire stele would have possibly looked like before it was broken. Without this historical context an individual viewing the Rosetta Stone without background knowledge would not draw the conclusion that it is a religious relic.

The modern presentation of the Rosetta Stone goes against the argument made by Riggs (2014) which states that museum curators should attempt to provide an experience that is transformative and informative about the time and surrounding context of an antiquity (p. 201). This could be issue could be solved by the museum curator creating an immersive environment in a culturally correct and respectful manner that respects the integrity of the antiquity. The

antiquity could also be displayed in a manner that respects its' contemporary cultural significance as well. This could include displaying it in a manner that illustrates how the Rosetta Stone was the key to deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphics.

Ethical Dilemma

The ethical considerations surrounding the Rosetta Stone are complex (Downs, 2010, p. 19). While it is held in Britain (made legal by the dictate of a 200-year-old Ottoman signature), it holds significance to three nations: the Egyptians, the French, and the British (Downs, 2010, p. 19). The Rosetta Stone was originally created by the Egyptians in 196 BC, but then was discovered by the French in 1799, but then taken by the British as war booty and preserved by the nation since 1801 (Downs, 2010, p. 19). This creates an ethical dilemma as all three nations value the Rosetta Stone (Downs, 2010, p. 19).

Friedman (2020) makes the argument that the transfer of ownership happens only when two individuals mutually agree upon the transfer of a good (p. 121). When Britain received the Rosetta Stone it was signed to them by officers of the Ottoman Empire, not the nation of Egypt (Downs, 2010, p. 19). Therefore, according to the moral argument made by Friedman (2020, p. 121), the Rosetta Stone was not a legal transfer of ownership due to the Ottoman Empire not being the original owners or finders of the Rosetta Stone. Further, Friedman (2020) argues that happening to find an object does not automatically grant ownership over an antiquity (p.121), such as in the case of the French. In this case it would be deduced that the Egyptians are in fact the proper owners of the Rosetta Stone.

Downs (2010) explains that Egypt took action in condemning and retaliating against the British Museums' ownerships of the Rosetta Stone (p.19). Zahi Hawass, the Secretary-General of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, refused to allow further archaeological digging by

institutions to occur in Egypt until Museums returned their stolen goods (Downs, 2010, p. 19). A danger of this practice is the potential entanglement between politics and museums (Downs, 2010, p. 19). The refusal to return an antiquity can become interpreted as an aggression by nations against each other, especially in the cases of Western imperialist nations and their colonized nations (Downs, 2010, p. 19).

Downs (2010) argues that every nation has the right to their own cultural artifacts, and proposes that Britain, Egypt, and France create a tripartite ownership agreement and rotate the Rosetta Stone between the three nations (p. 19). This would allow for each nation to reap the benefits, such as an increase in tourism, that the Rosetta Stone offers (Downs, 2010, p. 19). Even if it was not morally correct for the Ottoman Empire to have signed ownership of the Rosetta Stone to Britain it still occurred and remains recognized as legal, even though it goes against the argument made by Friedman (2020, p. 121). Since the Rosetta Stone has remained in Britain since the 1800s, and the nation has a legal agreement that states their ownership over the antiquity, it is highly unlikely that the nation would ever return the Rosetta Stone to the Egyptian people. Therefore, by creating a tripartite ownership agreement it would create the best possible solution for the issue at hand.

Conclusion

The Rosetta Stone remains to be one of the most important artifacts unearthed in contemporary times. It allowed for the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphics, leading to the development of Egyptology becoming an academic area of study. Scholars and admirers have the French Officer Boussard to thank for the discovery of the antiquity (Wallis Budge, 2012, p.19). By comparing the Rosetta Stone within the realm of its' historical context, scholars were able to create a depiction of what they believe the stone would have looked like in its' entirety

(Parkinson et al., 1999, p. 26). Though cracking the language code in contemporary times, scholars could then further examine the historical context and original usage of the Rosetta Stone (Parkinson et al., 1999, p. 25). In contemporary times, the Rosetta Stone is displayed at the British Museum. The display is minimalistic, which does not reflect or respect the antiquities historical significance or context. The author has made suggestions to improve the contemporary display of the antiquity, such as through creating an immersive environment with other Egyptian artifacts. There are ethical dilemmas surrounding the ownership of the Rosetta Stone that must be considered. While Friedman (2020, p. 121) argues that without the mutual agreement of transaction between two parties that there is no transfer of ownership, it is unlikely that after having ownership over the Rosetta Stone since the early 1800s that the British Museum would return it to the Egyptian nation. Therefore, a tripartite ownerships agreement between the English, French and Egyptian nations would allow for the best solution to the issue at hand and allow for every nation to reap the benefits and cultural significance that the Rosetta Stone holds to each nation (Downs, 2010, p. 19).

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