

SEEKER OF KNOWLEDGE

THE MAN WHO DECIPHERED EGYPTIAN HIEROGLYPHS

text and illustrations
by James Rumford

Genre

A **biography** is the story of a real person's life as told by another person. As you read this biography, notice how the author uses words and images to tell his story.

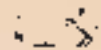


Question of the Week

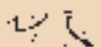
How can knowing another
language create understanding?



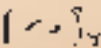
There is a jumping, free-spirited kid goat in the Egyptian word "imagine."



There is a sharp-eyed ibis bird in the word "discover."



There is a long-necked, far-seeing giraffe in "predict."



In 1790, a French boy named Jean-François Champollion was born 🏠.

When he was seven, his older brother told him about General Napoleon, the great leader of France, who was in Egypt uncovering the past.

"Someday I'll go to Egypt too!" Jean-François told his brother as he sat spellbound, imagining himself with Napoleon, making his own discoveries 🦋.

When Jean-François was eleven, he went to school in the city of Grenoble. There, his brother took him to meet 🏠 a famous scientist who had been in Egypt with Napoleon.

The scientist's house was filled with Egyptian treasures. Each one captured the boy's imagination.



"Can anyone read their writing?" asked Jean-François.

"No. No one," the scientist replied.

"Then I will one day," said Jean-François, and he left the house full of enthusiasm, sure that he would be the first to discover the key to Egyptian hieroglyphs.

Back home, his brother helped him get down all the books they had on Egypt. On moonlit nights, Jean-François stayed up reading long after he should have been asleep.

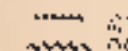
His brother nicknamed him "the Egyptian" and bought him notebooks. Jean-François filled them with hieroglyphs. There were prowling lions 🦁, angry monkeys 🐒, trumpeting elephants 🐘, and sharp-eyed ibis birds 🦩 with their long, curved bills. He could not read the Egyptian words, but he dreamed that one day he would, as he sailed up 🚢 the Nile.





Jean-François had a favorite animal. It was the lion because there was one in his name: JEAN-FRANÇOIS CHAMPOLLION.



There are strongly woven sandals firmly planted on the ground in "never give up."



When Jean-François finished school at sixteen, his brother took him to Paris to meet  the **scholars** who were studying a black stone from Rosetta, Egypt. The stone was covered with Egyptian and Greek words and told of a king of Egypt named Ptolemy. By reading the Greek, the scholars hoped to decipher the Egyptian. But the work was difficult—certainly too difficult for a boy—and the scholars turned Jean-François away .


They did not see the fire burning bright in his eyes. They did not recognize the genius who



had already learned all the known **ancient** languages. They did not know that he was a **seeker** of knowledge, one who would not rest until he had found the answer.

Jean-François gathered his notebooks and returned to Grenoble. There he taught school. His students often came to hear him talk about Egypt—her pharaohs and gods and the mysterious writing.

Once, even Napoleon came to Grenoble and sat up all night, listening spellbound as Jean-François told the great man of his dreams.

Napoleon promised to send Jean-François to Egypt when he conquered the world. Napoleon dreamed of glory. Jean-François dreamed of discovery .



*There are two regal,
heads-up-high leopards
in the word "glory."*



*Thoth, one of the
ancient gods*



During these troubled times, scholars everywhere were racing to solve the mystery of Egyptian writing. Unbelievable things were said. Ridiculous books were written. No one had the answer. Then an Englishman discovered that a few of the hieroglyphs on the Rosetta Stone were letters, and he deciphered King Ptolemy's name. Everyone said that the Englishman would be the first to unlock the door to Egypt's past—everyone except Jean-François.

When Jean-François was thirty, he gathered up his notebooks and left Grenoble. He made his way back to Paris—to his brother.



The letter **P** in
Ptolemy's name



The letter **T** in
Ptolemy's name



To Jean-François,
this was the letter **A**.



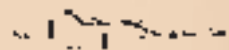
The letter **W**



There is a roaming,
black-as-night jackal in
the word "mystery."










There is an unblinking
crocodile lurking in the word
"trouble."

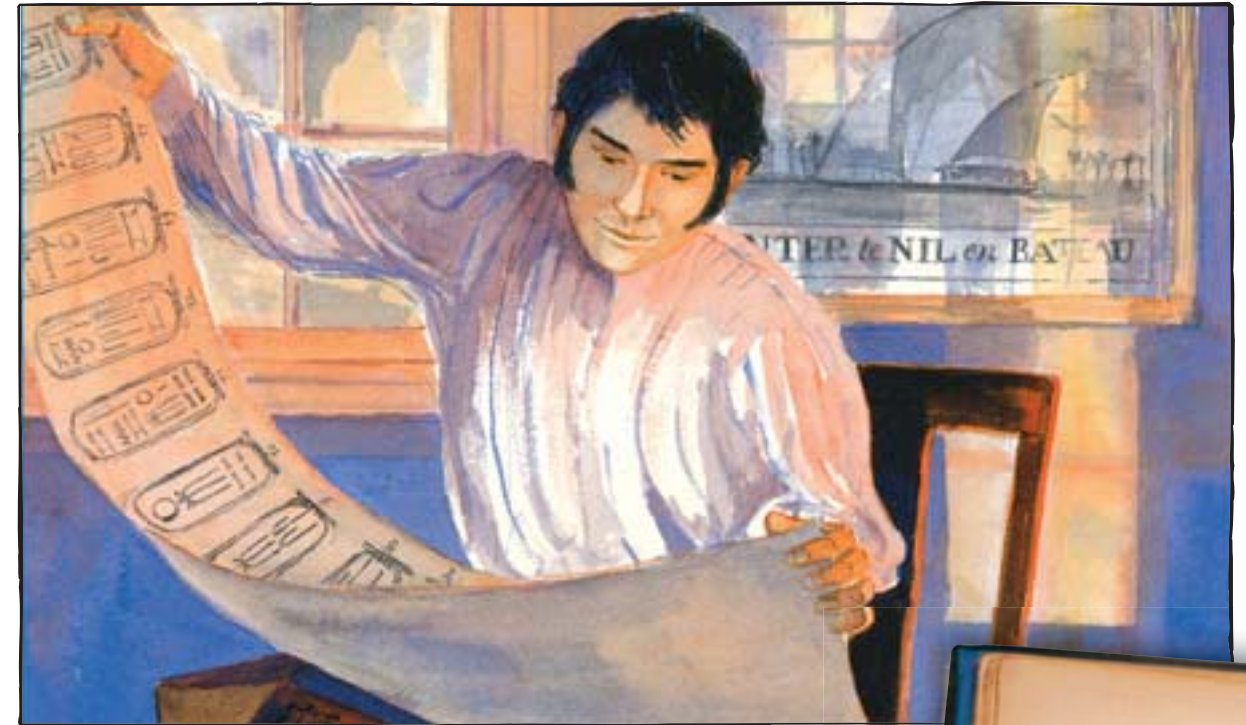


But a few months later, Napoleon was defeated at the Battle of Waterloo. France was now defenseless. Her enemies poured in. They surrounded Grenoble and in the early morning bombarded the city. Jean-François ran to save his notebooks from the flames.




The people were angry with Napoleon and anyone who knew him. They pointed fingers at Jean-François and called him a traitor. He fled into the woods, leaving his notebooks behind. There he lived like a hunted dog. It was weeks before it was safe to come out and months before he saw his notebooks again.

In Paris, Jean-François studied the Rosetta Stone and other inscriptions. He compared the Greek letters with the Egyptian hieroglyphs and herded together his own alphabet of eagles  and lions  and dark-eyed chicks . But this wonderful list of letters was no help in reading the language. There were too many pictures he did not understand. What to make of a fish with legs , a jackal with wings , or an ibis god with a long, curved bill ? There had to be a **link** between the pictures and the Egyptian letters. But what was it? Jean-François slept little. He ate almost nothing.

Then, on a September morning in 1822, Jean-François found  a small package on his doorstep—from a friend in Egypt! In it were the names of pharaohs copied from a



temple wall. Each name was a jigsaw puzzle of letters and pictures. Jean-François studied the names and saw the link! The pictures were sounds too. Not single letters, but syllables, even whole words!

One of the names drew him. It began with the hieroglyph of an old, silent friend perched on a sacred staff . This was a picture of the god of writing, Thoth, followed by the letters *m*  and *s* .

“Thothmes!” Jean-François suddenly exclaimed, and the rushing sound of the pharaoh’s name, as if carried on wings across the centuries, filled the room.



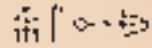
*The royal cartouche,
or ring of rope, encircling
Thothmes's name*



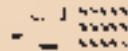
*Thothmes (also
written Thutmose or
Thutmosis), one of
the ancient pharaohs*





*There is a blue lotus, its
center as bright as the yellow
sun, in the word "joy."*




*There are rippling river
waves in the word "Nile."*






Jean-François raced  down the street to his brother's office. He burst through the door, exclaiming, "I have the key!"

Then he collapsed . He had not eaten. He had not slept. For five days, he lay near death.

On the fifth day, he awoke. "Pen and paper," he whispered, and he wrote of his discovery to the world.

People all over France celebrated  his triumph as Jean-François became the first to translate the ancient writing and open the door to Egypt's past.



A few years later, the people of France sent Jean-François to Egypt on an expedition to uncover  more secrets . He knew Egypt so well in his mind that he felt he was going home. As Jean-François had imagined a thousand times in his dreams, he sailed up  the Nile.

Once ashore, he entered the ruins of a temple. A magnificent flock of ibis suddenly rose up from the reeds and took flight.

Below, the ibis saw the seeker of knowledge touch the stone walls.

His fingers dipped into the carved pictures. He pressed his ear to the stone and listened to the ancient voices.

