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The Discovery of the Rosetta Stone

Lead: Napoleon's Egyptian fiasco resulted in one of the most important archeological finds in history.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: One of the few disasters of Napoleon Bonaparte's career was the invasion of Egypt. This attempt to turn Egypt into a French colony came to grief when the British sent a fleet under Admiral Nelson defeated the French at the Battle of the Nile. He took 50,000 soldiers and sailors and marines to

Egypt and returned with little over 23,000 of which there were 3,000 invalids.

Though the French Emperor was a military genius with few equals, he knew very little of art and science. Perhaps he sensed military triumph alone would not secure him a lasting place in history and that he needed to erect some monument of legislation or scientific progress. To that end, he brought with him a group of scientists, engineers and mathematicians to study the land he proposed to conquer. He created the Institute of Egypt as a kind of brain trust whose advice he would use to administer the country and lay the foundation for future development. During the entire time France was

involved Egypt, they examined the country. The result of their work was *Description de Egypt (The Description of Egypt)* with its 10 volumes of text published between 1809 and 1808. Two of the fields to which this scientific organization made its greatest contribution were geography and Egyptology. The map of Egypt which Napoleon commissioned was completed in 1806.

In their examination of many of the artifacts discovered, they had a great deal of difficulty understanding the ancient Egyptian language. The ancient Egyptians conveyed messages in the form of hieroglyphs or picture words rather than words of text. They would skillfully copy down thousands

of inscriptions with no idea what they were inscribing. A chance discovery during an archeological dig in the town of Rosetta, about 35 miles northeast of Alexandria helped solve the mystery. A team led by a Captain Bouchard discovered a broken slab of black basalt, 3 feet, 9 inches long and 2 feet, 4 1/2 inches wide. Three languages were written on what came to be known as the Rosetta stone. At the top section were Egyptian hieroglyphics, on the bottom was Greek and in the middle, an unknown writing, which since has come to be called demotic. This stone originated during the reign of the Egyptian king, Ptolemy Epiphanes V who reigned from about 200 years before Christ

and was written in commemoration of his accession to the throne.

After the French surrender in Egypt in 1801, the stone passed into British hands and through the work of Thomas Young and Jean-Francois Champollion, the hieroglyphic text was determined to be a translation of the Greek and eventually, through the study of the stone, a picture of ancient Egyptian sprang into view. Each year thousands of tourists see the Rosetta Stone on display at the British museum.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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