

“Rosetta Stone”: One or More? Examples of Multilingualism Texts and the Deciphering of Ancient Scripts*

*Ahmed Mansour***

Abstract

The decipherment of ancient languages and scripts was a challenging mission for linguists and philologists. There are successful and unsuccessful attempts to decipher ancient and famous languages, of which is the Egyptian hieroglyphs. In 1822, Champollion announced in the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres his innovative methodology to read ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs when he could read the three scripts of the Rosetta Stone: Hieroglyphic, Demotic, and Greek. Champollion’s theory is based on finding a multi-script or multi-script text that is used as an aiding tool to read and decipher the required scripts.

Thus, this paper sheds fresh light on the role of multilingualism in decoding ancient scripts. It is worth mentioning that the “Rosetta Stone” became an equivalent term of an assistance tool to crack ancient languages and scripts, giving examples of famous texts such as the Behistun Inscription and the manuscript copy of Landa alphabet.

During my first years as a junior researcher in the Writing and Scripts Center, affiliated to the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, I heard much about the late Professor Ramadan El-Sayed; however, I did not have the opportunity to meet him personally. I was told about the late Professor's scientific approach and competence that enabled him to receive much respect inside and outside Egypt. In addition, his abundant scientific production inspired many Egyptologists, both Egyptians and foreigners, to follow and continue his research career. Indeed, I became fascinated with the Professor's ability to deal with different subjects of the ancient Egyptian language with a deep understanding of its philology and context.

In his famous article "Rosetta Stone in its Seven Copies and Champollion",¹ Professor Ramadan El-Sayed listed seven copies of the Rosetta Stone where multilingual texts were inscribed on official documents in order to convey the King's message to the people of Egypt, based on the different linguistic background. The *Decree of Memphis (the Rosetta Stone)* is dated to Year 9 of the reign of Ptolemy V, and it was inscribed in different copies: five stelae can be found in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Then it was recopied on the walls of the Temple of Philae, known as the first and second decrees of Philae.²

Though the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs was in 1822 by Champollion (after several attempts, beginning with the Medieval Arabs³), as Thomas Young said: "the key is turned into the lock, but the door can never be opened". It is easy to read the ancient Egyptian texts, but to trace back the minds of the ancient Egyptian people is a completely different matter. The Rosetta Stone offered a golden opportunity to decipher Egyptian hieroglyphs, but it is also a monumental and historical artifact that represents diverse and competing cultures.⁴

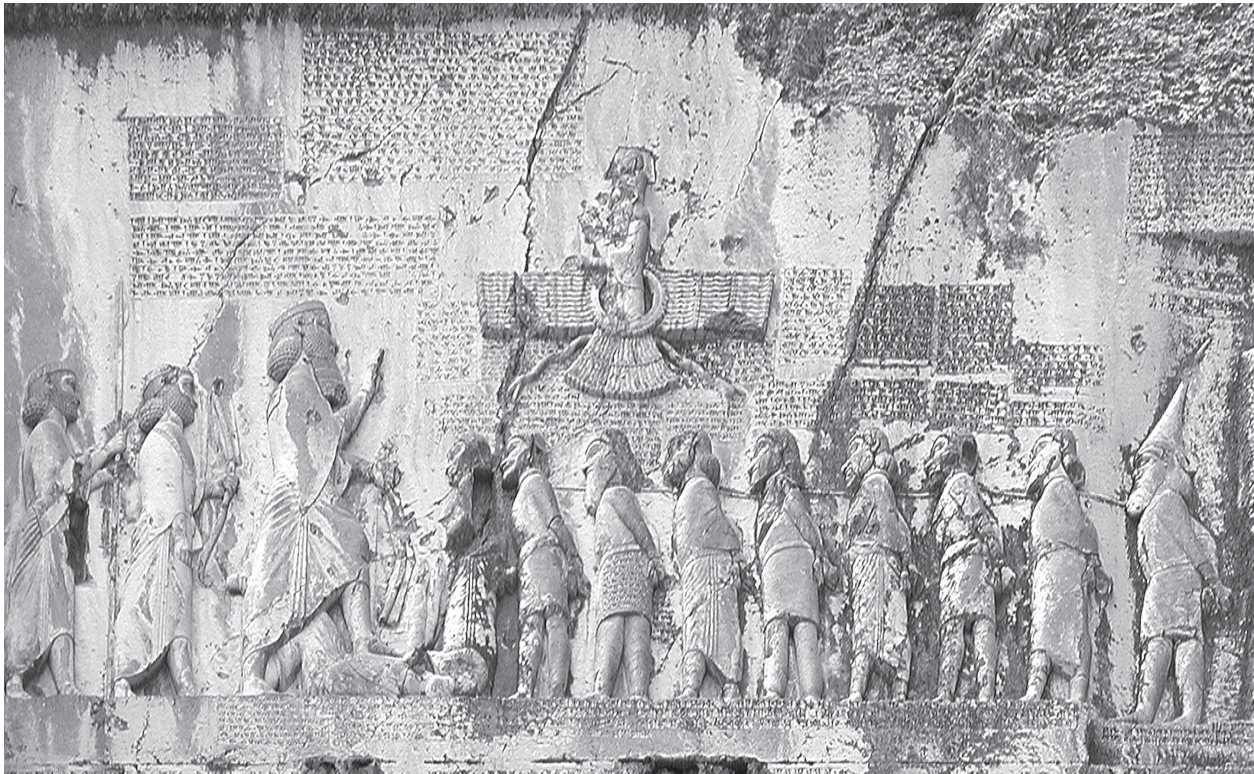
Professor El-Sayed valorized the role of multilingualism in Ancient Egypt and its role in deciphering ancient scripts and languages. Indeed, the decipherment of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs by Champollion offered a vibrant methodology to decipher ancient scripts and languages.⁵ The decipherment of ancient scripts would not have been achieved unless there was an aiding tool, in this case the known language of Greek. Multilingualism had been of much interest to linguists, anthropologists, and social and cultural historians.

In this brief essay, I would like to shed fresh light on different examples of "Rosetta Stone" of ancient scripts, and their role as an assisting tool that helped decipher ancient scripts and languages. The "Rosetta Stone" has been accepted as a synonym of a bilingual/multilingual text that is considered to be the key or the intermediary to decipher ancient scripts.⁶ Thus, it is worth mentioning that I used the term "Rosetta Stone" to describe each "multilingual" text that has helped to decipher ancient scripts.

Behistun Inscription: Rosetta Stone of Cuneiform

In page 48 of his article "Rosetta Stone in its Seven Copies", the late Professor Ramadan El-Sayed mentioned briefly the decipherment story of cuneiform script. He referred to the Behistun Inscription which is considered the key to understand the cuneiform. Certainly, the multilingualism of this text played a great role and had a positive impact in its decipherment (Fig. 1).

Cuneiform is one of the oldest writing systems in the ancient world. It began in Mesopotamia between 3400 and 3300 BCE, as seen in the writings found in Uruk (actually Warka),⁷ which dates back to this



(Fig.1) Behistun Inscription.

period. Cuneiform was used for a variety of languages for over three-thousand years: Sumerian, Akkadian, and the two dialects of Akkadian: Babylonian and Assyrian. It was even the international writing used in diplomatic correspondences throughout the ancient Near East during the Late Bronze Age.

The Behistun Inscription is a massive inscription of Darius I (522-486 BCE), that was cut into a cliff in the Zagros Mountains in Western Iran near the little town of Behistun. Three scripts were used in this inscription: Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian cuneiform. The early linguists and philologists started from scratch to decipher it, each of them searching for a “Rosetta Stone”. First, the English army officer Henry Rawlinson, considered the founding father of cuneiform decipherment, attempted to decipher the inscription.⁸ He presented a preliminary translation where he was able to identify the names of peoples ruled by Darius I. Then, by 1850, he was able to produce a complete translation of the part of the Behistun Inscription in Old Persian.⁹

Later, in the eighteenth century, Carsten Niebuhr was the first to confirm that the inscription of Darius I consisted of three distinct scripts (Persian, Elamite and Akkadian). Then, in the mid-eighteenth century, the German archaeologist Georg Freidrich Grotefend was able to read and identify the name of Xerxes, Hystape, and Darius. He also noticed a recurring pattern in the signs of the cuneiform inscriptions found at Persepolis—the ceremonial capital of the Achaemenid Empire—and deduced that these patterns likely read: “Xerxes king, king of kings, son of Darius, king of kings”.¹⁰ However, the big event related to the decipherment of cuneiform happened in 1857, when the British Royal Asiatic Society held an international symposium, in which Rawlinson and others participated. A newly discovered cuneiform text was given to

the participants to obtain a final confirmation that cuneiform was really deciphered. This short experiment confirmed the unlocking of cuneiform.¹¹

Wad Ban Naqa Bark Stand: Rosetta Stone of Meroitic Script

The Meroitic script has its famous “Rosetta Stone”. It is the Wad Ban Naqa bark stand.¹² The Meroitic script is considered a descendant of Egyptian hieroglyphs. It was used by the Kushite Empire during the third century BCE.¹³ The Meroites also worshipped Isis in her temple on Philae Island. The Meroitic script was deciphered by Francis Llewellyn Griffith, with a touch of Champollion’s genius. Earlier scholars, notably the pioneering German archaeologist Karl Richard Lepsius (who had helped to prove Champollion’s decipherment theory), made a start, but it was Griffith, with access to a mass of newly excavated inscriptions from Meroe and other sites in Sudan, who ‘cracked’ the script in the period 1909-1911. He associated both the hieroglyphic and cursive forms of each letter, and then compiled a complete list of characters. Griffith focused his work on Wad Ban Naqa bark stand, which is now conserved in Berlin, to identify the sound of each letter. He compared the cursive and hieroglyphic Meroitic scripts and soon realized that he could draw up equivalences between the cursive and hieroglyphic signs. The key turned out to be a cursive inscription found written around the edges of flat altars or offering tables at Meroe and elsewhere.¹⁴

The bark stand was erected inside the Isis Temple at Wad Ban Naqa in 25 CE. It displays on both sides a King named Natakamani and a Queen named Amanitore while supporting the sky. Both their throne names are written in Egyptian hieroglyphs, while their birth names are written in Meroitic hieroglyphs.¹⁵

Landa Manuscript: Rosetta Stone of Maya Script

In the mid-nineteenth century, both American and European adventurers explored the tropical forests in Meso-America and South America. Among them were two famous travelers who explored and discovered the Maya civilization: the American diplomat John Lloyd Stephens and the English artist Frederick Catherwood. They published a book that contained accurate glyphs of the Mayan script, which was still undeciphered.¹⁶

Unlike Egyptian hieroglyphs and cuneiform, no bilingual text had been discovered that could help to crack the Mayan script. However, an interesting “Rosetta Stone” was found in the Madrid Library in 1862. It is a manuscript copy of Landa alphabet. This manuscript contains the alphabet of the Mayan script, compiled from native informants by Bishop Diego de Landa (1524-79).¹⁷ For many years, the manuscript was neglected and did not draw much attention from linguists; but in 1952, the Russian linguist Yuri Knorosov first used it to read the glyphs of the Maya. It is now established that Mayan script includes both syllabic and logographic signs. In addition, it is probably the closest to Egyptian hieroglyphs with its elite features and its integration with pictorial representation.¹⁸

Discussion

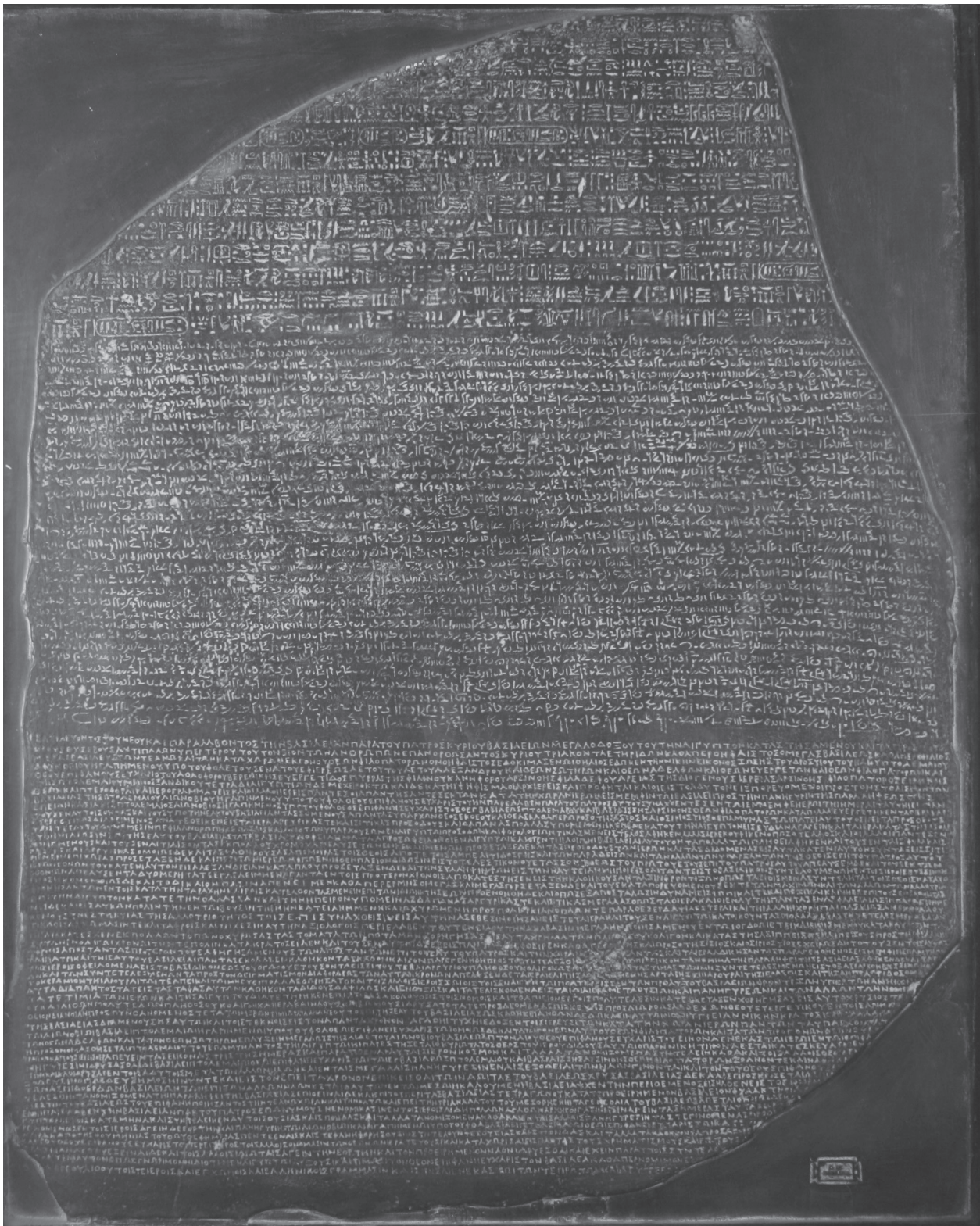
The outlook of this brief report is not linguistic or philological; the approach taken here is historical. The diversity and multilingualism that existed in ancient Egypt had a bearing on the history of the country

and its people. Through the introduction of new languages, its citizens learned to interact with languages, scripts, cultures and other people. Although the Egyptians had an ancient and prestigious local language, many foreign languages were used in the administration as well as in daily life at different points in time, particularly with the rule of non-native rulers from the ninth and eighth centuries BCE onwards. The plurality of languages and writing that Egypt witnessed along its history, gave rise to one of the most cosmopolitan melting pots in the ancient world, and although the peak of Egyptian multilingualism is the Ptolemaic period [323-30 BCE], the country witnessed, in the pre-Ptolemaic period, the appearance of different foreign languages in the official and public spheres.¹⁹

Several examples of this multilingualism can be seen throughout the history of the country. For example, during the Achaemenid rule in the sixth century BCE, people used Aramaic; and under the Ptolemies in the fourth century BCE, they used Greek. Similarly, languages such as, Meroitic, Carian, and Greek and scripts such as cuneiform appeared and were used at different points in the history of the country.²⁰

After Alexander the Great's death in 323 BCE, Egypt became a Ptolemaic monarchy. In the early Ptolemaic period, the administration functioned largely in Demotic. Meanwhile, the priestly circles set up a number of so-called trilingual inscriptions, of which the Rosetta Stone is one example, to document the decisions of their councils. Then, the Ptolemies effected a radical change by making Greek the official language of the government, and by promoting Greek culture in various forms, one of which was the public display of monuments with texts inscribed in Greek. Therefore, the use of multilingualism is vital to introduce a comprehensible and intelligible text for its users, and in the meantime, close to the idiom in use, such as demotic (Fig. 2). Thus, the Rosetta Stone was inscribed in hieroglyphic, Demotic and Greek. The Demotic was an idiom, reflected in daily life in ancient Egypt as opposed to the Greek, which was the language of the elite; meanwhile, the hieroglyphic text was used to impose the solemnity and sacredness of decisions of the king, thus made public.²¹ Similarly, the Behistun Inscriptions were inscribed in different scripts that could be read and understood by the peoples ruled by Darius I.

To conclude, bi/multilingualism is one of the greatest riches of humanity, as it enabled philologists to penetrate the mysteries of ancient languages in order to decipher them. One can observe the analogy between the history of the decipherment processes of ancient scripts, in which the use of multilingualism is a common intermediary tool. In addition, bi/multilingualism was used to facilitate communication among society members: rulers, administrators, and ordinary people. There are still several ancient scripts, such as the Indus script and Linear A that remain undeciphered, but if we discover a “Rosetta Stone”, we can give a push forward to crack them.



(Fig. 2) Rosetta Stone.

Endnotes

- * I would like to thank William Joy for his efforts in revising the English language of this essay, and proofread it.
- ** Director, Writing and Scripts Center, Academic Research Sector, Bibliotheca Alexandrina.
- 1 Published in Arabic as following: Rāmādān ‘bdū, ‘Hāgār Rāšīd fī nūsāhīh al-sab‘ wa šāmbulūn’, māgālīf al-tārīh wālmūsāqābl, al-‘dd 1, ināir 2000, klīf al-‘adāb, ḡām ‘ī al-’mnīā, 3-49 حجر رمضان عبده، ” رشيد في نسخه السبع؟ وشامبليون“، مجلة التاريخ والمستقبل، العدد الأول، يناير ٢٠٠٠، ٣-٤٩.
 - 2 See D. Valbelle, J. Leclant (eds.), *Le décret de Memphis* (Paris, 1999), 43.
 - 3 See O. El-Daly, *Egyptology: The Missing Millennium: Ancient Egypt in Medieval Arabic Writings* (London, 2005).
 - 4 R. Parkinson, *Cracking Codes: The Rosetta Stone and Decipherment* (Los Angeles, 1999), 195.
 - 5 Parkinson, *Cracking Codes: The Rosetta Stone and Decipherment*, 176.
 - 6 The term “Rosetta Stone” has also become an icon of all new discoveries in the modern age. The European Space Agency launched a mission in 2003 to chase, go into orbit around, and land on a comet. Its name is “International Rosetta Mission”, along with Philae, its lander module. This reflects an Egyptomania passion.
 - 7 Some 30 km east of modern *As-Samawah*, Iraq.
 - 8 Parkinson, *Cracking Codes: The Rosetta Stone and Decipherment*, 184.
 - 9 A. Robinson, *The Story of Writing: Alphabet, Hieroglyph & Pictograms* (London, 2000), 72-73.
 - 10 M. Guichard, ‘How Cuneiform Script Was Deciphered’, in A. Christin (ed.), *A History of Writing from Hieroglyph to Multimedia* (Paris, 2002), 33.
 - 11 Guichard, in Christin (ed.), *A History of Writing: From Hieroglyph to Multimedia*, 34.
 - 12 Wad Ban Naqa is the name of a village on the right bank of the Nile just below the VI Cataract, after which the ruins of an important site from the time of the Kush Empire are named in the scientific literature; these are located on the northern border of the district between the two branches of the Wadi el Kirbakan. See Karl-Heinz Priese, ‘Wad Ban Naqa 1844’, *Forschungen und Berichte* Bd. 24, *Archäologische Beiträge* (1984), 11-29.
 - 13 C. Rilly, ‘Meroitic’, in J. Stauder-Porchet, A. Stauder and W. Wendrich (eds.), *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology* (Los Angeles, 2016). <http://digital2.library.ucla.edu/viewItem.do?ark=21198/zz002k7ghs>.
 - 14 A. Mansour, ‘The Meroitic Inscriptions in Egypt’, in K. Azab and A. Mansour (eds.), *The Journey of Writing in Egypt* (Alexandria, 2010), 130-132.
 - 15 It is a bark stand of an altar of King Natakamani and Queen Amanitore ca. 1-25 CE, made of sandstone. It is conserved in the Berlin Museum. Inv.-No. ÄM 7261. The Prussian Expedition led by Richard Lepsius visited the site of Wad Ben Naga near the Sixth Cataract in 1844. The expedition transported the largest one to the Berlin Museum. The block represents a chapel, and it served as a stand for the bark of the god or for his cult statue. The four sides are decorated with figurative panels; at the top is a horizontal hieroglyph representing a star-filled sky. The sky is supported by two female goddesses and by the king and queen. In front of and behind the king and queen, the names are written in cartouches. A unique feature is that one of the names (the throne name), is written in Egyptian hieroglyphs, and the birth name is written in Meroitic hieroglyphs. However, in the longer vertical inscription, the birth name is again written in Egyptian hieroglyphs—a true (albeit small) bilingual.
 - 16 M. Davoust, ‘Mayan Script and Society from the Second through the Tenth Centuries’, in A. Christin (ed.), *A History of Writing from Hieroglyph to Multimedia* (Paris, 2002), 34-169; M.D. Coe, M. Van Stone, *Reading the Maya Glyphs* (New York, 2001), 7.
 - 17 Robinson, *The Story of Writing: Alphabet, Hieroglyph & Pictograms*, 130-135.
 - 18 Parkinson, *Cracking Codes: The Rosetta Stone and Decipherment*, 186.
 - 19 A. Papaconstantinou (ed.), *The Multilingual Experience in Egypt from the Ptolemies to the Abbasids*, 1-4 (Surrey, 2006).
 - 20 P. Briant, ‘Inscriptions multilingues d’époque achéménide : le texte et l’image’, in D. Valbelle, J. Leclant (eds.), *Le décret de Memphis* (Paris 1999), 91.
 - 21 W. Clarysse, ‘Ptolémées et temples’, in D. Valbelle, J. Leclant (eds.), *Le décret de Memphis* (Paris, 1999), 29.