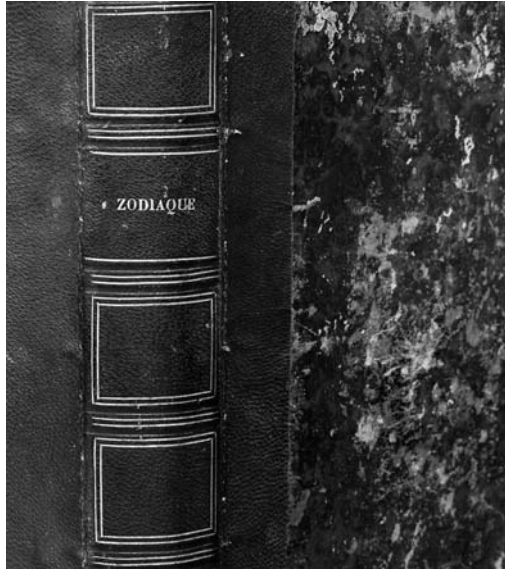


INTRODUCTION



Seven years ago one of us wandered into a small book shop near the Luxembourg Palace in Paris. A volume half-clad in red Morocco sat intriguingly apart on a lower shelf. Its spine, stamped in gold with one word, *Zodiaque*, held a bound selection of pamphlets, heavily annotated in a contemporary hand. Each pamphlet concerned something called the “zodiac of Dendera.” Why had these obscure articles been collected? Indeed, why were they written in the first place, and why had someone devoted such a considerable amount of time to commenting on them? One thing was certainly clear: whatever the subject of the pamphlets was, it had created a sensation in Paris at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The “zodiac of Dendera” was easy enough to find. Consisting of two large sandstone blocks, it is embedded in the ceiling of a small room of its own in the Egyptian antiquities section of the Louvre. Some of the figures that cover the stones look like the familiar symbols for the zodiacal constellations; along with many hieroglyphs, they are arrayed in an apparently regular fashion around the center. First seen, and drawn, by Europeans during Napoleon’s Egyptian expedition in the late 1790s, the stones had landed in Paris in 1821 after a Frenchman by the name of Lelorrain journeyed to Egypt with explosives and saws to steal the

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artifact for personal profit and national glory—glory being at a rather low ebb even six years after Napoleon’s fall and the country’s occupation by foreign troops.

Book illustrations, drawings, and eventually prints of this and three other Egyptian “zodiacs” produced during and shortly after Napoleon’s campaign circulated widely two decades before the Dendera ceiling made its physical appearance in France. Many of the *savants*, as the scholars, engineers, scientists and mathematicians who accompanied the expedition were known, claimed that the placement of figures on these objects was intended to represent the state of the sky at the time they were designed, if not carved. If this were true, then astronomy could be used to prove that Egypt’s history reached back much further than anyone had hitherto suspected, back at least fifteen thousand years, nine millennia before the biblical date of Creation itself.

In the early years of Napoleon’s consulateship and empire, revived religiosity coupled to continuing royalist sentiment contended with republican ideology. Both fought the empire’s efforts to establish its legitimacy, producing a precarious polity that the régime took considerable trouble to control. The great age claimed for the zodiacs thrust them into the midst of these conflicts. For they threatened to resurrect the dangers of impiety and the disintegration of traditional social hierarchies that repatriated reactionaries associated with the *philosophes*, the free-wheeling eighteenth-century intellectuals who were blamed for the excesses of the revolution and the Terror. The zodiacs also gave mathematically trained savants the opportunity to challenge their historical and philological colleagues for control of the past, since many of the savants were certain that the zodiacs testified to an Egypt of profound sophistication, the primordial source that had flooded the ancient world with scientific and mathematical knowledge. When, years later, the Dendera artifact was ripped from its home and brought to a Restoration Paris where angry royalist Ultras busily policed print and speech, the zodiacs again exerted their power, summoning a demonology of greed, anger, reaction, calculation, Machiavellian power-plays, intrigue—and a vaudeville comedy with political overtones.

Not surprisingly, the zodiacs were from the beginning stamped with contemporary French attitudes to Egyptian civilizations, past and present, attitudes that rested on specific beliefs about history. These views had taken a particular cast during the invasion. Napoleon’s rank-and-file soldiers neither tolerated the savants well, nor did they

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demonstrate much understanding of Egyptian customs. The savants themselves had considerable sympathy for the *fellahin*, or peasants, and the Egyptian literate classes, but even they had expected to find a people oppressed by centuries of alien domination. Moreover, the French Arabists who accompanied the expedition apparently had little sense of the language's modern form, to the annoyance of educated Egyptians, who reciprocated French disdain. Al-Jabarti, an astute and sophisticated Cairene chronicler of the invasion, deplored the colonizers' crude intrusions into local government, not to mention their irreligious views and their inelegant Arabic. There were few grounds here for a respectful meeting of minds, improbable though that would have been in any event, given the violence of the invasion.

Admiration, even awe, for Egypt's past grew among the French invaders in direct proportion to their disdain for Egypt as they found it. The discovery of what seemed to be four ancient zodiacs carved into the ceilings of temples buried nearly to their roofs in sand fit neatly into this vision, for they were taken to be evidence of a glorious civilization, now lost, that dated from millennia before the Greeks were believed to have developed astronomy. The zodiacs, two at Esneh and two at Dendera, were first found by General Desaix as he led his army up the Nile near Luxor, the site of ancient Thebes. The artist Vivant Denon, who was traveling with the company, rapidly drew several of them. Denon's drawings, along with a romantic version of his adventures with Napoleon's army, circulated soon after the campaign in a newspaper account and then in a massive folio printing. Smaller editions followed, making Denon's *Voyage* a bestseller in France and in England, propelling the debates on zodiacal antiquity as well as fueling a rage for all things Egyptian during the empire. Egyptian motifs soon appeared on wallpapers, dinner services, architecture, even clocks, charging the period's esthetic culture with exoticism and politics.

Two decades later, the advent of the Dendera stones seven years into the Restoration reignited the incendiary power of Egypt in France. The zodiac awakened submerged, and politically dangerous, memories of Napoleonic glory, not to mention republicanism's notorious hostility to religious dogma. Scholarly battles raged and overlapped with politics, religion, and popular culture as the Dendera zodiac conjured Egypt's ancient and France's recent past. Aristocratic Ultras and a reempowered Catholic clergy fought every sign of nascent *philosophie*, which was to them the evil fruit of eighteenth-century intellectual license. The zodiac seemed a particularly dangerous object, good only for would-be

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philosophes to mount new attacks on the organic unity of throne and altar, ever-threatened by materialistic republicanism.

The foundation of the zodiac debates had been laid years before Napoleon's expedition, for events during the revolution had turned questions about the age and character of antique civilizations into sites of political contention. A claim made by one Charles Dupuis during the 1780s concerning the origins of all forms of religion, including monotheism, and which interpreted myths in astronomical and agricultural terms, was particularly potent. It had spread so widely and proved so durable that in later years it was nearly impossible for scholars to engage with questions about ancient Egyptian astronomy and religion without implicitly or explicitly referring to Dupuis. His theory enraged reactionaries, and it is not hard to see why. For Dupuis connected his claims to speculations about the origins of the zodiac, whose birthplace he located in an Egypt older by far than any chronology based on textual arguments, and especially on the Books of Moses, could possibly allow. During the revolution, Dupuis' scheme played out in extraordinary ways. It was well known to, and admired by, many of the savants who accompanied Napoleon to Egypt, men who regarded all forms of religion as remnants of superstitious awe hijacked by scheming priests to hoodwink an ignorant populace.

Although the details of Dupuis' argument were new, and its feverish antireligiosity breathed the atmosphere of prerevolutionary France, Egypt had been considered the original source of knowledge as early as the time of Plato. Scholars in the seventeenth century had provided countervailing arguments. In 1614 Isaac Causabon had demonstrated that one group of texts, the influential Hermetic Corpus, actually dated from about 200 CE and not, as had been claimed, from Egypt before the time of Moses. Nevertheless, Egypt and the mysteries of its hieroglyphs continued to capture the European imagination throughout the eighteenth century. One widely read French work of the time by Constantin Volney argued that history amounted to a succession of continually reemerging ancient civilizations, notably Egypt's. Influenced by that vision, Napoleon conceived his invasion as the latest act in this grand historical drama. For Napoleon expected to be greeted as a liberator by native Egyptians, descendants of a wise and graceful past, who had been subjected for centuries to the oppression of the Ottoman Turks and their Mameluke satraps. He was neither the first, nor certainly the last, to cloak naked conquest in the guise of benevolent assistance to a tyrannized populace.

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The Napoleonic expedition was, in the end, a debacle. Native Egyptians had little love for the Mamelukes, but neither did they greet the French invaders as liberators. Revolts and resistance to the occupation were frequent, and the French responded with great brutality. The English fleet under Admiral Nelson destroyed the French flotilla not long after its arrival at Alexandria, effectively isolating the army in Egypt. Napoleon returned clandestinely to France a year later, leaving in charge General Jean-Baptiste Kléber, who was assassinated nine months afterward by a Syrian who detested the presence of non-Muslims in the region. The French occupiers were forced to capitulate by the end of August 1801, though not to the local rulers but to the English, who had managed to mount an Egyptian invasion of their own.

A great deal has been written about Napoleon's military expedition, and about the savants who accompanied it. We will not trod these well-worn paths.¹ Instead, we will ask how the savants' views and prejudices shaped, and were shaped by, their understanding of the artifacts, sketches, drawings, engravings, models, and finally the Dendera carving itself, that they encountered in their efforts to make sense of the zodiacs. Images and words sent back to France, and the eventual return of the savants to a country under the effective control of the man who had led them into Egypt and had abandoned them there, molded early reactions to the zodiacs. These reactions continued to evolve over the decades following Napoleon's expedition, often in response to prevailing political winds.

The arrival of the stones in France provoked impassioned arguments in many quarters: in the pages of popular and scholarly journals, in salons, around dinner tables, at the meetings of learned societies, and even on the Parisian stage. These debates, nominally about the age of antique civilization as revealed by the zodiacs, open a window onto deeper issues of the day, such as the comparative values of different ways of knowing about the past, including astronomy and calculation versus historical philology, and the nature and power of scientific against religious authority. Profoundly motivated by either religious conviction or its opposite, the zodiac debates hinged in part upon the ways in which numbers could be trumped by words and architectural styles, or vice versa. They mark a moment at which these two worlds began strongly and overtly to separate, in environments saturated with conflict over the proper place for, and the very nature of, belief in the unseen.

The hub around which the arguments swirled concerned the age of the world—more precisely, how many centuries had elapsed since the

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catastrophe that had erased most, if not all, of humanity in a universal Flood. By the late eighteenth century many students of Earth's geologic history had concluded that the world had existed long before, perhaps immensely long before, the Flood, which meant that Creation itself had not occurred a mere six millennia ago. Nevertheless, in almost every such discussion two elements were not up for reinterpretation: the nearly complete extermination of humanity in a universal catastrophe about four millennia or so ago, and the creation of humans by a deity not many centuries before that.

The antireligious philosophes and their underground followers and competitors in the decades before the revolution had challenged nearly every aspect of religious belief, generating a powerful local reaction from the Gallican church and its hangers-on. The revolutionary years had had further dramatic effects, culminating in the establishment of several cults devoted to the extirpation of churchly "fanatics" and their replacement with devotees to icons of "reason." These events markedly affected the attitudes of the young savants who invaded Egypt with Napoleon, and especially the controversies that erupted upon their return, since the savants were certain that Egyptian civilization predated the biblical date of the world's origin, to say nothing of the Flood. These themes remained a constant, if occasionally subterranean, factor in the zodiac debates throughout the empire and the first decade of the Restoration. Religious conservatives received the savants' zodiacal calculations with contempt, propelled in part by their attitude to science, which many among them both feared and hated.

The diaries, reminiscences, books, newspapers, pamphlets, and remnant ephemera of these years provide ample evidence of the often vicious and threatening scribblings of the religious press that followed the return of émigrés to France. Not that their efforts were entirely new, since the reaction had begun years before the revolution itself. The horrific events of the Terror, when prelates had either to leave, to renounce their vows, or to die, cemented the Right's long-standing conviction that freedom of expression and the abolition of social hierarchy lead inevitably to the abyss. The years after the Restoration saw the emergence of repeated, though only partially successful, efforts to establish a thoroughly repressive regime based on the Right's vision of an idyllic past that had never existed, a past in which a faithful and dutifully submissive populace knew its proper place in a social hierarchy that united throne with altar. The "infernal" stone from a pagan temple, as some reactionaries called the Egyptian zodiac, generated

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great fear and anger for dread of its power to subvert the historical ground of religious belief. Yet the zodiac's inflammatory potential also provided opportunities for influence and profit that could be, and were, taken advantage of.

Among those who became entangled in the later debates was Jean-François Champollion, a young man recently arrived in Paris and well connected with one of the major savants on Napoleon's expedition. A superb linguist, Champollion was convinced that hieroglyphs should be treated neither as cryptographic codes nor as mystical talismans, as had mostly been done until quite recently. Rather, these mute symbols could only be made to speak if one first understood how ancient Egyptians themselves spoke as they went about their daily lives. On September 22, 1822, Champollion wrote to Bon-Joseph Dacier, the permanent secretary of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, where philology, linguistics, and antiquity increasingly mixed with one another. That famous missive provided a first explanation of the essential principles for reading the hieroglyphs. A signal element in Champollion's decipherment was his penetrating analysis of signs appearing on parts of the Dendera stones that had been left behind but that were available to him, as to many others, through drawings made by the expedition's savants.

When Champollion visited Egypt many years later, he made excitedly for Dendera. Standing among the remnants of the ruined temple, he was confronted, perhaps for the first time, with the limits of his own philological genius. What he found near the void that had once contained the zodiac was sufficiently explosive that it remained private for a dozen years following his death in 1832, two years after the expiration of the Bourbon monarchy. Although by the end of the 1830s the zodiacs had lost much of their power to excite political and cultural passions, arguments concerning their astronomical character continued to reappear over the years, as they do even today.