

The Rosetta Stone: where does it belong?

This famous 2,200-year-old stone has been in the British Museum since 1802, where it has been admired by millions of visitors over the years. It remains at the centre of a controversy: should it stay in Britain or go back to its homeland, Egypt?

A few weeks ago, in December 2009, this controversy was once more in the news. Dr Zahi Hawass, a well-known Egyptian scholar who has been fighting for the return of the stone for several years, returned to London to argue his case.

The stone was discovered by a French soldier in Napoleon's army in 1799, in El Rashid, a village at the mouth of the River Nile, Egypt. When the French were defeated by the British army, it was then taken to Britain and has remained there ever since.

The ancient stone is black granite, roughly rectangular in shape and 114 cm high. The front of the stone is smooth and is inscribed with tiny writing, using three different scripts. The top part is hieroglyphic, a script made up of small pictures which was used by priests in Ancient Egypt (for example, there are images of a basket and an eye); the middle section is written in demotic, the common script used in Egypt at the time; the last section is in Greek, the language of administration, used by the rulers. The ancient stone is from 196 BC, the Ptolemaic Period. The text is actually written by priests in honour of their young 13-year-old king, Ptolemy.

The stone is important because it holds the key to understanding hieroglyphic, a script which had died out centuries earlier and which no modern linguists had been able to understand before the stone's discovery. Since the same text is written in three languages, in 1822 translators were able to use the other scripts on the stone to help decode the hieroglyphics. Of course this was of huge importance to Egypt and Egyptology.

Dr Zahi Hawass would like to place the artefact in a new museum near the Pyramids, to be completed in 2012. He also wants to bring back other priceless objects from Ancient Egypt held around the world and he accuses Britain and other countries of theft. It is thought that the British Museum may finally agree to loan the Rosetta Stone for a few months.

Exercise 1

Read paragraphs 1 and 2 of the text and answer the questions.

- 1 What is the controversy about the Rosetta Stone?
- 2 Who is Dr Hawass and what does he want?

Exercise 2

Circle the correct answer.

- 1 The stone is...
 - a more than a metre high
 - b more than two metres high
 - c less than a metre high

- 2 The stone is ...
 - a grey
 - b dark blue
 - c black

- 3 The stone has _____ types of writing on it.
 - a three
 - b two
 - c one

- 4 It was found in the late 1700s by ...
 - a the Egyptians
 - b the British
 - c the French

- 5 Before the stone was discovered, no one in modern times could understand ____ script.
 - a ancient Greek
 - b hieroglyphic
 - c Latin

- 6 The stone is important for _____ reasons.
 - a geological
 - b political
 - c linguistic

- 7 At present, the stone is in ...
 - a a museum near the Pyramids, Egypt
 - b a museum in the UK
 - c a museum in France

- 8 The stone will _____ be moved to another country.
 - a never
 - b possibly
 - c certainly

Exercise 3

These are the arguments put forward by the British and by the Egyptians, who both want the stone. Can you decide who says what?

- We have the facilities to look after it well here. Our museum is old and secure and the conditions are perfect for the stone.
- The stone is part of our national identity. It belongs to us.
- The stone belongs here, with many other of humanity's important cultural artefacts to show all people's global achievements.
- The stone is necessary for our economy – it is a major tourist attraction.
- Our country has had all its riches stolen by others. It is time for these artefacts to be returned.
- Without the Rosetta Stone, we would not have understood so many other ancient Egyptian artefacts and documents. It is part of our culture.

Exercise 4

Discuss the questions.

- 1 Who do you think should have the stone? Why?
- 2 Can you think of any other artefacts which are also at the centre of a similar controversy ?
- 3 If you were Dr Hawass, what would you do?

Glossary

controversy (noun) - a disagreement that a lot of people have strong feelings about

ancient (adjective) - very old

script (noun) - a system of written letters and symbols

priest (noun) - a man who performs religious duties in some religions

hieroglyphics (noun) - writing that uses pictures and symbols to represent sounds and words, especially ancient Egyptian writing.

artefact (noun) - an interesting object from the past

priceless (adjective) - very valuable