

Martin Robinson Delany (1812-1885). He has had an enduring impact on African-American life and history. His academic and professional activities include work as a medical doctor, politician, author, publisher, novelist, explorer, and army officer.

□ Martin DELANY and Egyptology

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Abstract : *Martin Robinson Delany (1812-1885) was clearly the first African-American to attempt to visually present, transcribe, and translate Egyptian hieroglyphs in a text entitled Principia of Ethnology: The Origins of Races and Color, with an Archaeological Compendium of Ethiopian and Egyptian Civilization from Years of Careful Examination and Enquiry (1879). There has never been any research conducted on descriptively understanding the method and significance of his effort to translate Egyptian hieroglyphs. The purpose of this paper seeks to present a philological and historical examination of his effort to translate Egyptian hieroglyphs historically contextualized as a response to the impact of the famous "American School of Ethnology" and one of its prominent members, George Robins Gliddon, an amateur Egyptologist who played a foundational mediating role in introducing Egyptology and the work of Champollion to American audiences in the nineteenth century.*

Résumé : **Martin DELANY et l'Égyptologie** - *Martin Robinson Delany (1812-1885) a été indiscutablement le premier Africain-Américain à présenter visuellement, transcrire et traduire les hiéroglyphes égyptiens dans un texte intitulé : Principia of Ethnology: The Origins of Races and Color, with an Archaeological Compendium of Ethiopian and Egyptian Civilization from Years of Careful Examination and Enquiry (1879). Il n'y a jamais eu de travaux de recherche visant à comprendre la méthode sous-tendant son effort de traduction des hiéroglyphes égyptiens, ni sa signification. Cet article propose un examen philologique et historique de cette entreprise de traduction des hiéroglyphes égyptiens en la contextualisant : il s'agit d'une réponse à l'impact de la fameuse "American School of Ethnology" et de l'un de ses membres les plus éminents, George Robins Gliddon, un égyptologue amateur qui a joué un rôle médiatique fondateur en introduisant l'égyptologie et les travaux de Champollion auprès du public américain au 19^{ème} siècle.*

The career and ideas of Martin Robinson Delany (1812-1885) have had an enduring impact on African-American life and history.¹ His academic and professional activities include work as a medical doctor, politician, author, publisher, novelist, explorer, and army officer. Throughout his life, Delany was extremely active politically, having a deep faith in the capacity, ability, and self-determination of African-Americans to shape their own future. He is called a Black nationalist because his theoretical and practical commitments were always grounded in an awareness and, at times, almost exclusive concern with the social, political, economic and institutional development and advancement of African-Americans. While most of his life and work were situated within an American political and social context, Delany always took pride in his African heritage and at various stages in his

¹ The earliest biographical treatment of Martin Delany is contained in Frank A. Rollin, *Life and Public Services of Martin Delany* (New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1969[1868]). The two prominent biographical treatments of his life written in the 20th century are Dorothy Sterling, *The Making of an Afro-American: Martin Robinson Delany, 1812-1885* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971); Victor Ullman, *Martin R. Delany: The Beginnings of Black Nationalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971). An excellent source that compiles many of his writings and speeches from various sources is Robert S. Levine, ed., *Martin R. Delany: A Documentary Reader* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

life attempted to develop elaborate social, political, and economic networks with Africa. As head of the upstart Niger Valley Exploration Party, Delany travelled to Yorubaland in West Africa in 1859 where he personally conducted investigations, gathered facts, examined evidence, and eventually signed a treaty with an African chief of Abeokuta in hopes of establishing a colony that would settle skilled African-Americans.

In addition to his political activities, Delany also consciously directed a significant part of his work to understanding the relationship and relevance of histories of African antiquity to contemporary African-American life. In his scholarship on African antiquity, Delany was clearly the first African-American to attempt to visually present and translate Egyptian hieroglyphs in a text transcribed in his own hand. There has never been any research conducted on descriptively understanding the method and significance of his effort to translate Egyptian hieroglyphs. The purpose of this paper seeks to present a philological and historical examination of his effort to translate Egyptian hieroglyphs historically contextualized as a response to the impact of the famous “*American School of Ethnology*” and one of its prominent members, George Robins Gliddon, an amateur Egyptologist who played a foundational mediating role in introducing Egyptology and the work of Champollion to American audiences in the nineteenth century.

Of all of the chapters and verses in the Bible, perhaps none resonated more with Martin Delany than that contained in chapter 68, verse 31 of the Book of Psalms: “Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God.”² In 1879, Delany submitted this verse for the reader’s reflections as part of a concluding statement in one of the final major publications of his life entitled *Principia of Ethnology: The Origins of Races and Color, with an Archaeological Compendium of Ethiopian and Egyptian Civilization from Years of Careful Examination and Enquiry*. For Delany, this passage from the Book of Psalms encapsulated his life-long belief that knowledge and understanding of the lofty African place and role in the ancient world would play an integral role in his hope for the “regeneration of the African race” in the contemporary world. Delany also knew that the ancient world was never a neutral world; it was a world that was utilized to frame religious and historical creation narratives of human origins that were inextricably linked to real political outcomes. In *Principia of Ethnology*, Delany attempted to refute some of the racist ideas in the emerging scientific discourses of Egyptology, ethnology, and archaeology that perpetuated and promoted the idea that the inferior status of African people had been virtually unchanged since antiquity and their future destiny would inevitably conform to the stability of the past. As an important part of his portfolio of evidence, Delany attempted to translate some Egyptian hieroglyphic texts using primarily a symbolic and allegorical interpretation.

Delany’s effort was grounded in and reflective of the great dynamism inherent in a wide variety of historical attempts to decipher the Egyptian language. In the early 19th century, Egypt could only be understood and interpreted within a frame of reference based primarily upon the Bible, classical Greek and Roman writers, and/or the multidimensional layers of symbolic language transmitted through the institution of freemasonry and sundry other esoteric interpretations prevalent in European renaissance thought, art and architecture.³

² Martin R. Delany, *Principia of Ethnology: The Origin of Races and Color With an Archaeological Compendium of Ethiopian and Egyptian Civilization, From Years of Careful Examination and Enquiry* (Philadelphia: Harper & Brother, Publishers, 1879), 95.

³ For insightful treatments, see Peter Ucko and Timothy Champion (eds.), *The Wisdom of Egypt: changing visions through the ages* (London: UCL Press, 2003); Erik Hornung, *The Secret Lore of Egypt: Its Impact on the West* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); James Stevens Curl, *Egyptomania, The Egyptian Revival: a Recurring Theme in the History of Taste* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1994).

Despite many observations and reflections on Ancient Egypt from various classical Greek and Roman writers, we have no textual evidence that demonstrates any appreciable mastery of the Egyptian hieroglyphic system of writing. By the 5th c. A.D., even an Upper Egyptian priest named Horapollon, author of a book entitled *Hieroglyphica*, evidenced the inability to fully understand the language of his own cultural heritage.⁴ For Horapollon, each glyph was viewed as a symbol and allegory, as a unique container and conduit of meaning. In this structure, each symbol was viewed as a separate semantic entity, yet related to each other in deciphering the complete textual meaning. For example, Horapollon submitted the following explanation of the hieroglyph of a fish: “to show the lawless and abominable, they draw a fish, because its flesh is hated and an object of disgust in the temples. For every fish is a purgative, and they eat each other.”⁵ The symbolic and allegorical interpretation of the Egyptian language, although having some very limited accuracy in Horapollon’s work, was, of course, only a small part of a fuller and more comprehensive system of writing. The First edition of *Hieroglyphica* appeared in Europe at the beginning of the 16th c. and exerted a powerful influence over the next 300 years. Boas asserts that “whatever knowledge of the hieroglyphs Western Europe had before the nineteenth century was mainly taken from this very book.”⁶

In the early 19th century, a young French savant named Jean-François Champollion would decipher the system of hieroglyphic writing using the Rosetta Stone and transcend the structural limitations of past interpretations.⁷ Although the catalyst for Champollion’s efforts to decipher Egyptian hieroglyphs was motivated, in part, by freemasonry, his eventual decipherment communicated in a famous letter to M. Dacier in Sept. 1822 would forever rupture the allegorical frame of reference common to all prior interpretations.⁸

Champollion’s discovery introduced a new frame of reference that inevitably impacted the future interpretation of the Egyptian past. The decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs is constituted by three distinct, yet interrelated components: the system of hieroglyphic writing, the scripts of the language (hieroglyphic, hieratic, demotic, Coptic), and the successive stages of the language (Old Egyptian, Middle Egyptian, Late Egyptian, Demotic, and Coptic). It is important to note that at the time of Champollion’s death in 1832, the complete decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs was still very much an ongoing process, and not a static discovery that began and ended with Champollion. Nevertheless, most scholars were eventually compelled to accommodate Champollion’s discovery with their previous knowledge.

There were many frames of reference based on the Bible, classical Greco-roman writers, and Freemasonry still competing after Champollion’s discovery, especially in America where the first academically trained American Egyptologist, James Henry Breasted, did not occur until the end of the 19th c., well after Delany’s 1879 publication.⁹ In the minds of many, Champollion’s discovery provided no evidence that a more scientific frame of reference was preferable to other frames of reference based upon the Bible, classical

⁴ *The Hieroglyphics of Horapollon*, Translated by George Boas (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷ Richard Wilkinson, *Cracking Codes: The Rosetta Stone and Decipherment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 12-45.

⁸ Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, Volume I: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 251.

⁹ M.L. Bierbrier, *Who Was Who in Egyptology* (London: The Egypt Exploration Society, 1995), 62.

Greco/Roman writers, and freemasonry. Some scholars accommodated the discovery and viewed it as complementary to their preexisting frame of reference, others attempted to use the discovery as a basis to begin to gradually disentangle Egypt from prior frames of reference, and still many others like Delany engaged Champollion's discovery in some way, while still believing in the primacy of inherited historical frames of reference pre-Champollion.

Delany used Egyptian hieroglyphs to draw consistent parallels with his Christian religious outlook which largely informed his historical perspective. For Delany, Biblical archetypes were intimately linked with the present and perceived in a complex way as acting not just on a spiritual level, but more importantly, a "historical" level in the sense that a proper understanding of the past had an essential meaning for the comprehension of the present and the future. It is surprising that Delany's use of Egyptian hieroglyphs in the *Principia of Ethnology* has never been the object of a historical or critical investigation. Past scholarship has rightly emphasized the continuity between *Principia of Ethnology* and Delany's prior works, but this is insufficient to account for the significant alterations that Delany makes in the *Principia of Ethnology* with the addition of Egyptian hieroglyphs and their interpretation.¹⁰

The presentation of Egyptian hieroglyphs in Delany's work commences in Chapter 10 entitled "Builders of the Pyramids." Before submitting the first images of Egyptian hieroglyphs, it is significant to point out that Delany highlighted the Greek writer Diodorus 'Siculus', the 1st c. B.C. Greek historian, to initially ground his perception and treatment of Egyptian hieroglyphs.¹¹ As Delany notes, Diodorus emphasized and elaborated on the symbolic and allegorical nature of Egyptian hieroglyphs. This citation indicated that Delany's frame of reference would be implicitly at odds with the importance of Champollion's early 19th c. discovery. In fact, the two columns of Egyptian hieroglyphs that Delany submits were, as he says, "copied from the obelisks of Luxor, taken by Champollion from Egypt to Paris, where they are now deposited as relics of antiquity."¹²

When one looks at Delany's hieroglyphs, the reader probably assumes that they are written in Delany's own hand since the hieroglyphic presentation exhibits a very rough orthography suggesting an active process of copying.(see Appendix I) Indeed, some of the hieroglyphs depicted show little resemblance to the probable actual form of the hieroglyphs. If, as Delany stated, these glyphs ultimately have as their source Champollion himself, one would definitely not expect Champollion's hieroglyphic writing to show so many problematic idiosyncracies in style and presentation.

The problem is further compounded by the fact that Delany does not provide the reader with any direct book citation upon which he based his analysis. Due to this fact, the reader might indirectly conclude that these initial hieroglyphs were copied from the Duke of Argyll's *Primeval Man*, a work that plays a prominent and central role in Delany's reflections.¹³

Nevertheless, all of these explanations ultimately fail to establish the derived source of these initial hieroglyphs although Delany provided one important clue asserted at the

¹⁰ Cyril E. Griffith, *The African Dream: Martin R. Delany and the Emergence of Pan-African Thought* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975), 102-105; Victor Ullman, *Martin R. Delany, The Beginnings of Black Nationalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 510-512.

¹¹ Delany, *Principia*, 47.

¹² Delany, *Principia*, 49.

¹³ Duke of Argyll, *Primeval Man: An Examination of some Recent Speculations* (New York: George Routledge & Sons, 1871).

beginning of his work. He stated that “the theory of Champollion, Nott, Gliddon, and others, of the Three Creations of Man; one Black, the second Yellow, and the last White, we discard, and shall not combat as a theory, only as it shall be refuted in the general deductions of this treatise.”¹⁴ Hence, Delany’s *Principia of Ethnology* amounts to a complex internal critique and refutation of major thinkers who have been often referred to as the “American School of Ethnology” most notably Josiah Nott, George Gliddon, and Samuel Morton. Understanding this nexus between Delany’s work juxtaposed against the background of certain historical antecedents initiated by the “American School of Ethnology” yields greater clarity of his effort to translate Egyptian hieroglyphs.¹⁵

Josiah Nott received his medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania in 1827 and went on to become a prominent physician in Mobile, Alabama. In his scholarship, he attempted to transform accepted explanations of racial differences based upon the Bible to explanations grounded in science. Samuel Morton received his medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania in 1820 and went on to become a prominent physician and professor of anatomy in Philadelphia and secretary of the renowned Academy of Natural Sciences in 1831. Morton focused much of his life’s work on attempting to create a permanent record of human types by collecting skulls from all over the world. In his scholarship, he began to assert that there was an important relationship between cranial capacity and the unique character of races. With Egyptian skulls supplied by George Gliddon, Morton wrote a book in 1844 entitled *Crania Aegyptiaca*.¹⁶ Based upon his analysis of Egyptian skulls, Morton submitted 15 major conclusions. The following are three of the most important:

1. “*The valley of the Nile, both in Egypt and in Nubia, was originally peopled by a branch of the Caucasian race.*”
2. “*Negroes were numerous in Egypt, but their social position in ancient times was the same that it now is, that of servants and slaves.*”
3. “*The physical or organic characters which distinguish the several races of men, are as old as the oldest records of our species.*”¹⁷

The tenor of racist thought illustrated by Morton’s work dominated the American landscape in the 19th century and he played an extraordinary role in creating scientific arguments to explain Black inferiority that would endure in various forms well into the 20th century.

The combined intellectual efforts of Nott, Morton, and Gliddon resulted in the publication *Types of Mankind* (1854), a comprehensive work that represented a sort of zenith in the vigorous use of “race science” to relegate Africans to an eternal state of savagery, primitivity, and inferiority in the origin and evolution of world peoples and civilizations.¹⁸ One of the most significant themes of this work was the assertion that comprehension of Black inferiority could no longer be understood through the medium of environmental explanations, but rather, had to be sought through more enduring biological explanations.

¹⁴ Delany, *Principia*, 9.

¹⁵ An excellent source for understanding the dynamism and complexity of the American image and use of Ancient Egypt is Scott Trafton, *Egypt Land: Race and Nineteenth-Century American Egyptomania* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

¹⁶ Samuel George Morton, *Crania Aegyptiaca; Observations on Egyptian Ethnography, Derived from Anatomy, History and the Monuments* (Philadelphia: John Pennington, 1844).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 65-66.

¹⁸ William Stanton, *The Leopard’s Spots: Scientific Attitudes Toward Race in America 1815-1859* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), 161-173.

In his work, Delany challenged the deeper significance of this work because it marshaled a wide variety of scientific data to essentially prove that Africans were not merely an inferior type from the same human species, but they sprang from a completely different inferior species or type. In reflecting on the meaning of the work, Nott said that “*the Negro question was the one I wished to bring out and [I] embalmed it in Egyptian ethnography, etc., to excite a little more interest.*”¹⁹ A speech given by Nott four years earlier to the Southern Rights Association in Mobile, Ala. entitled “The Natural History of Mankind, Viewed in Connection with Negro Slavery,” aptly characterized his overt political use of these scientific findings to justify the institution of slavery.²⁰ Nott often provided an appropriate label to describe his own work as “the nigger business” or “niggerology.”²¹

The recognition of George Robins Gliddon as probably the most important individual responsible for introducing the field of Egyptology in America contributes to an illuminating examination and fuller understanding of his undeniable impact on Delany’s work. Gliddon, the U.S. vice-consul at Cairo, Egypt, first came to the United States in 1837 and returned three years later to begin what would become a twelve year lecture tour to American audiences on various topics in the emerging field of Egyptology.²²

Although Gliddon had some sporadic training in Egyptology under such notable personalities as Karl Richard Lepsius and Samuel Birch, Director of the British Museum, he admits that he makes “no claim to anything beyond the merest superficial acquaintance” in the area of Egyptology.²³ During these lecture tours, Gliddon constantly denied that the Ancient Egyptians were Blacks and used Egyptian crania “to prove that mankind in proportion to the population of the earth were just as distinct 4000 years ago as at the present day.”²⁴ The great financial success of Gliddon’s tours indicated how significant Egypt was as an American political, cultural, and social symbol used to frame and interpret a stabilized racial and racist hierarchy that encompassed the past, present, and future. The publication of his book, *Ancient Egypt: A Series of Chapters on Early Egyptian History, Archaeology, and Other Subjects Connected with Hieroglyphical Literature* (1843) was so successful that 24,000 copies were sold over a span of five years.²⁵

Although not directly mentioned or cited in his *Principia of Ethnology*, this work by Gliddon is the exact source for the first Egyptian hieroglyphs presented by Delany in chapter 10 of his work entitled “Builders of Pyramids.”²⁶ Some of Delany’s earlier works and speeches allude to considerable awareness of Gliddon’s writings. In *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (1852), Delany critiqued one of the core theses of Gliddon’s work in the context of his critical scholarly assessment of the publication of Robert Benjamin Lewis *Light and Truth* (1844).²⁷ Although Delany argued that *Light and Truth* was a substandard work of

¹⁹ George Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1971), 78.

²⁰ Stanton, *Leopard’s Spots*, 79; Frederickson, *Black Image*, 79.

²¹ Frederickson, *Black Image*, 78.

²² Stanton, *Leopard’s Spots*, 45-46.

²³ Stanton, *Leopard’s Spots*, 47; George Gliddon, *Ancient Egypt: A Series of Chapters on Early Egyptian History, Archaeology, and Other Subjects Connected With Hieroglyphical Literature* (Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson, Publisher, 1850), 8.

²⁴ Stanton, *Leopard’s Spots*, 50.

²⁵ Stanton, *Leopard’s Spots*, 49.

²⁶ Delany, *Principia*, 47.

²⁷ For fuller discussions see, for example, John Ernest, *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794-1861* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina

scholarship, he exclaimed that “there is one redeeming quality about “Light and Truth.” It is a capital offset to the pitiable literary blunders of Professor George R. Gliddon, late Consul to Egypt, from the United States, lecturer on Ancient Egyptian literature, &c., &c., who makes all ancient black men, *white*; asserts the Egyptians and Ethiopians to have been of the *Caucasian* or white race!- So, also, this colored gentleman, makes all ancient great white men, black- as Diogenes, Socrates, Themosticles, Pompey, Caesar, Cato, Cicero, Horace, Virgil, et cetera. Gliddon’s idle nonsense has found a capital match in the production of Mr. Lewis’ “Light and Truth,” and both should be sold together.”²⁸ Also, in one of Delany’s more prominent lectures called “Africa and the African Race” given in Great Britain in September of 1861 upon his return from his expedition to the Abeokuta settlement in modern-day Nigeria, Delany “controverted the statements of Gliddon” and thereby, used Gliddon as a foil to argue against the thesis that the Egyptians were part of the Caucasian race.²⁹ Although Gliddon is not directly named anywhere in Delany’s address on “The International Policy of the World Towards the African Race,” Delany’s assertions on Egyptian matters exhibited an engaged awareness of Gliddon’s work.³⁰ Thus, Delany’s career evidenced that he highlighted Gliddon as the primary scholar he juxtaposed himself against in Egyptian matters and this fact was undoubtedly the major factor involved in my selection of Gliddon’s work as the dominant source in understanding the nature and meaning of Delany’s hieroglyphic efforts.

In the *Principia of Ethnology*, the hieroglyphic inscriptions that Delany presents in two columns are actually taken from two different pages in Gliddon’s work on *Ancient Egypt*.³¹ (see Appendix II and Appendix III)

A comparison of Delany’s hieroglyphs with the hieroglyphs in Gliddon’s work indicate that these hieroglyphs in *Principia of Ethnology* are drawn in Delany’s own hand although his depictions closely approximate the hieroglyphs in Gliddon’s work. Gliddon, in turn, said that these hieroglyphs were copied from a book entitled *The Antiquities of Egypt; With a Particular Notice of Those That Illustrate the Sacred Scriptures* by William Osburn.³² (see Appendix IV and Appendix V) It is interesting to note that Gliddon probably did not copy these hieroglyphs himself. He asserted that “*from this work, with occasional extracts from others, the illustrations that embellish my oral lectures have been copied, with scrupulous fidelity, by Philadelphia artists.*”³³ Although Gliddon seems to be aware of a significant amount of literature in the emerging field of Egyptology, he self-consciously viewed himself as a popularizer and asked his audience to be sympathetic to “*the deficiencies proceeding from my own want of ability.*”³⁴ Gliddon’s use of Osburn’s book for these Egyptian hieroglyphs definitely speaks to some of these technical deficiencies. Delany began his interpretation of Egyptian hieroglyphic inscriptions by copying the following two lines from Gliddon’s work (see Appendix I):

Press, 2004), 101-132; Mia Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind: African-American Ideas about White People, 1830-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 44-46.

²⁸ Delany, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1993 [1852]), 129.

²⁹ See “Africa and the African Race” in Levine, *Martin R. Delany*, 362-363.

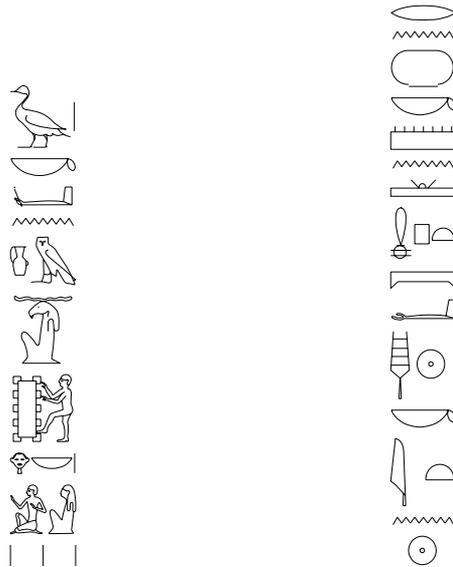
³⁰ Rollin, *Life and Public Services of Martin Delany*, 313-327.

³¹ Gliddon, *Ancient Egypt*, 27, 29.

³² Gliddon, *Ancient Egypt*, 27. William Osburn, *The Antiquities of Egypt; With a Particular Notice of Those That Illustrate the Sacred Scriptures* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1847).

³³ Gliddon, *Ancient Egypt*, 11.

³⁴ Gliddon, *Ancient Egypt*, 11.



Line 1:



b3.k ḥ3.(w) n ḥnm kd hr nb.w

Gliddon translation: “May thy soul attain to Khuam (sic) (spirit of God, one of the forms of Ammon the Creator) the Creator of all mankind (literally man and woman).”³⁵

Delany translation: “O, King, may thy soul (vital or never dying parts), as a boat upon the waters, run with thirst to God the fountain, everlasting Creator and Maker (or Builder) of all things, and all mankind” (men and women).”³⁶

My translation: “Your soul is measured by Khnum who fashions all people.”

Source: Unknown

Line 2:



wnn rn.k mn.(w) mi pt ḥk mi itn im.s

³⁵ Delany, *Principia*, 49.

³⁶ Delany, *Principia*, 48.

Gliddon translation: “Thy name (is) firm as heaven; the duration of thy days (is as) the disc of the Sun.”³⁷

Delany translation: “O! ever watchful eye, Thy name shall run and be handled as a boat upon the water, stand firm as the pillars of heaven, as long as water and land (earth) and all things under heaven and earth (all other things) exist, standing with time as solid as a rock above the waters, while the sun continues to shine.”³⁸

My translation: “Your name will be established like heaven, and your lifespan like the sun-disc in it.”

Source: Luxor obelisk of Ramses II now in Paris, France. The exact inscription is situated on the base of the Western face of the obelisk.³⁹

Brief Commentary on Line 2:

In Line 2, full sense is gained by reference to the original inscription. Gliddon did not include the verb *wnn* before *rn.k* “your name.” The verb *wnn* is used to express existence. In this example, the prospective of *wnn* allows the stative (old perfective) construction, *mn.(w)* “to establish” to function like a prospective, i.e. to express future existence, “will be established.”⁴⁰

In Line 2, Gliddon also did not include the phrase at the end of the sentence *im.s* “in it.” Before suffix pronouns, the preposition *m* “in” is written as *im*. In this example, the 3rd person feminine singular suffix pronoun *s* “it” is the object of *im* “in.” The use of this feminine suffix pronoun refers back to the preceding feminine noun *pt* “heaven.”

Delany mistakenly stated that these two lines of “*hieroglyphics are copied from the obelisks of Luxor, taken by Champollion from Egypt to Paris...*”⁴¹ Only the second column (Line 2) is copied from the obelisks of Luxor, but the ultimate source of the first column (Line 1) is unclear in both the work of Gliddon and Osburn.⁴² Delany provided the translation in Gliddon’s work of Line 1 and compared it to his own:

Gliddon translation: “*May thy soul attain to Khuam (sic) (spirit of God, one of the forms of Ammon the Creator) the Creator of all mankind (literally man and woman).*”⁴³

Delany translation: “*O, King, may thy soul (vital or never dying parts), as a boat upon the waters, run with thirst to God the fountain, everlasting Creator and Maker (or Builder) of all things, and all mankind” (men and women).*”⁴⁴

³⁷ Gliddon, *Ancient Egypt*, 27.

³⁸ Delany, *Principia*, 48.

³⁹ For the hieroglyphic text, see K.A. Kitchen, *Ramesside Inscriptions: Historical and Biographical, Volume II* (Oxford: B.H. Blackwell, LTD, 1979), 604: 9. For the English translation, see K. A. Kitchen, *Ramesside Inscriptions, Translated and Annotated, Volume II* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 399.

⁴⁰ For the prospective of *wnn*, see § 21.7 in James P. Allen, *Middle Egyptian: An Introduction to the Language and Culture of Hieroglyphs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 289.

⁴¹ Delany, *Principia*, 49.

⁴² Gliddon, *Ancient Egypt*, 29. Osburn, *Antiquities*, 109.

⁴³ Delany, *Principia*, 49.

⁴⁴ Delany, *Principia*, 48.

Based upon Delany's allegorical interpretation of Line 1, Delany mistakenly read the 2nd person masculine singular suffix pronoun .k which as an ideogram is a basket with a handle, as a boat. (see Appendix I) He read the preposition n "to" symbolically as "waters." The element that Delany really wished to highlight in his interpretation of Line #1 was the initial picture of the bird. Delany obviously looked at other parts of Gliddon's work and compared the hieroglyphic writing of this bird in this column with other similar representations in different parts of the book. In looking at this bird, Delany observed an essential similarity between the writing of this bird  in the above column (Line 1) and assumably the writing of this same bird as part of the nominal epithet  s3 R^c "son of Ra", an important part of the titulary of the Pharaoh that introduces the name of the Pharaoh before his formal accession to the throne. (Appendix VI) Delany probably saw this epithet of s3 R^c "son of Ra" following only three pages after the hieroglyphs depicted in Line #1.⁴⁵ (see Appendix VII) Of this nominal epithet, Gliddon remarked "every Pharaoh was the *sun* of Egypt; and over his name bore "Son of the Sun;" and as the *sun* was Phra, so each king was called Phra in common parlance, as we say king."⁴⁶

Although unstated and unexplained in Delany's work, reading this passage in Gliddon's work was clearly the catalyst that informed Delany's translation of the first bird as "O, King." Although this was a mistake by Delany, it was informed by a logical comparison because Gliddon does show these depictions of birds as essentially the same in two different places. Ultimately, Delany's mistake is an outgrowth of a mistake in copying by Gliddon and/or his commissioned artists. In comparing Gliddon's depiction of the bird with the bird in Osburn's *Antiquities of Egypt*, it becomes clear that Gliddon's artists failed to draw the protruding lappet at the base of the upper mandible of the bird which is technically a Saddlebill Stork  commonly referred to as a jabiru in Egyptological literature.⁴⁷ (see Appendix IV) Without the addition of this distinguishing physical feature, it would be impossible for an Egyptologist or a reader to transliterate this bird as b3 and thus, translate this initial bird as the word "soul."

Despite these mistakes by both Delany and Gliddon, it is still interesting to examine why Delany expressed and placed such a great emphasis on this bird and this passage. First, I think that Delany clearly recognized the importance that Gliddon attached to this passage. For Gliddon, this passage was proof of "*the primitive Egyptian creed of one God, the Creator, (whose divine attributes were classed in triads) of man's possession of a soul, and of its immortality; of a resurrection, and of the hope of such.*" Gliddon concluded by affirming that this passage attests to "the primeval piety of the Nilotic family over all contemporary nations, whom we are pleased to condemn as pagans."⁴⁸ Although Gliddon, like Nott, often expressed theories and positions that challenged inherited and authoritative Biblical interpretations, Delany observed in Gliddon's comments the origin of the important belief in one God among the Egyptians.⁴⁹ (see Appendix II)

⁴⁵ Gliddon, *Ancient Egypt*, 32.

⁴⁶ Gliddon, *Ancient Egypt*, 32.

⁴⁷ Patrick Houlihan, *The Birds of Ancient Egypt* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1986), 23. Delany mistakenly calls this bird a "phoenix." Delany, *Principia*, 50. For Gliddon's mistake, compare the depiction of the bird in Gliddon, *Ancient Egypt*, 29 and Osburn, *Antiquities*, 109.

⁴⁸ Gliddon, *Ancient Egypt*, 29.

⁴⁹ Frederickson, *Black Image*, 81.

For Delany, this passage was integrated into the frame of reference of Biblical interpretation and viewed as evidence of the power of the belief in one God transmitted through space and time by Egyptians and Ethiopians. Delany stated that “*we have, we think, sufficiently shown the proximity of Ethiopia and Egypt in customs, to justify the belief in their once unity of national interests. Ham, the head, first prince and ruler of Egypt, in the course of time dies of old age, leaving the rule to Mizraim, when the old King, Ham, is at once deified and worshipped as a god, under the name of Jupiter Ammon....He is also consecrated with the royal dynastic title of Ramses I.*”⁵⁰

For Delany, these two different depictions of birds  and , were greatly enlarged and singled out to become highlighted in such a way that it emphasized the importance of his argument as a whole.⁵¹ (see Appendix VI) Delany saw what looked like a roman numeral “I” placed above the saddlebill stork (Delany refers to the bird as a phoenix) and contrasted this depiction with the image of a sun-disc placed over a pintail duck (Delany also refers to this bird as a phoenix). In basic Egyptian grammar, the mark that looked like the number “I” to Delany is actually what is called a stroke determinative. In this particular example, a stroke determinative accompanies an ideogram of the saddlebill stork  that has become purely phonetic, the whole ideographic word being transferred to a phonetic usage.⁵² As his analysis progresses it becomes obvious that Delany wanted to stress the differences between these two depictions to fundamentally question and challenge the assertion Delany inaccurately attributed to Gliddon that these hieroglyphs were taken from a Luxor inscription of Ramses III.⁵³ In essence, Delany read the roman numeral “I” as connoting a different Ramses than Ramses III. He argued that the roman numeral “I” meant that the inscriptions was of Ramses I and not Ramses III.

For Delany, Ramses I was equivalent to the personage of Ham or Jupiter Ammon. These were crucial correspondences for Delany because they encoded the relationship between the Biblical past and the more remote ancestral past of Egyptians and Ethiopians. These connections allowed Delany to actually establish a Biblical line of Ham in the context of the Ramses dynasty in Egypt and he used these hieroglyphs to prove that the label “*The Sons*” (of Ham) would have been the most easy and definite distinction in alluding to them, during the entire period of the Ham line dynasty.”⁵⁴ Thus, Delany’s allegorical hieroglyphic interpretations reconciled Egyptian and Ethiopian history with Biblical history. For Delany, the fact that these were manifestations of great ancient African achievement provided African-Americans with not only a sense of connection to the past, but also an inherent sense of human ingenuity, creativity and possibility in the face of the whole mythological landscape of 19th c. White supremacy.

I also think that Delany was probably drawn to this particular passage and hieroglyphic interpretation because of his background as a prominent and established freemason. From Delany’s famous address in 1853 on “*The Origins and Objects of Freemasonry: Its Introduction to the United States, and Legitimacy Among Colored Men,*” it is clear that Delany had already believed that Masonry was first established in Egypt and Ethiopia, that “*the Ethiopians early adduced the doctrine and believed in a trinity of Godhead,*” and because “*Moses was learned in all of the wisdom of the Egyptians,*” it was transmitted

⁵⁰ Delany, *Principia*, 42.

⁵¹ Delany, *Principia*, 48, 50.

⁵² See § 25 in Sir Alan Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 34.

⁵³ Delany, *Principia*, 50.

⁵⁴ Delany, *Principia*, 51.

through the Bible.⁵⁵ In this address, he also noted that “previous to the building of the temple, Masonry was only allegorical, consisting of a scientific system of theories, taught through the medium of Egyptian, Ethiopian, Assyrian, and other oriental hieroglyphics understood only by the priesthood and a chosen few.”⁵⁶

In the Bible and freemasonry, each system of meaning is distinct and occupies its own position, yet there is an overlapping and undeniable connection between them that provides a sense of conceptual unity for the Masonic initiate who is able to grasp the whole in incremental degrees of understanding and knowledge. In freemasonry, it is fairly common knowledge that phrases like “the Sons of Light” are an important part of an important system of symbolic representation of an ancestral reality that engages in secret rituals and ceremonies that reenact the journey of humanity.

Viewing Egyptian phrases in Gliddon’s work like  sꜣ Rꜥ “son of the sun-God Ra” would have definitely resonated with Delany’s Masonic beliefs which probably, in part, informed his hieroglyphic interpretations. This particular use of Egyptian Hieroglyphs by Delany speaks to different levels of meaning and hinted at a system of restricted Masonic knowledge which concealed and revealed simultaneously. This use encoded meanings that were not widely shared, and would undoubtedly require access to Masonic knowledge for alternative latent meanings that transcended his surface argument.

The difference between Delany and Gliddon cannot be explained simply on the basis of hieroglyphic interpretation. The distinguishing components of their respective interpretations had very real political implications that were combined to produce a causal nexus between past, present, and future. Gliddon sought to refute the arguments of those that said “*that we must begin with Africans at the top of the Nile, and come downward with civilization, instead of commencing with Asiatics and WHITE MEN at the bottom, and carrying it up.*”⁵⁷ In direct contrast to Delany, Gliddon sought to “*sketch the events connected with the Caucasian children of Ham, the Asiatic, on the first establishment of their Egyptian monarchy, and the foundation of their first and greatest metropolis in Lower Egypt.*”⁵⁸ Gliddon said that there was no scriptural, monumental, or historical evidence to support the thesis that “*civilization originated in Ethiopia, and consequently among an African people, and was by them brought down the Nile to enlighten the less-polished, and therefore inferior, Caucasian children of Noah- the white Asiatics; or that we, who trace back to Egypt the origin of every art and science known in antiquity, have to thank the sable Negro, or the dusky Berber, for the first gleams of knowledge and invention.*”⁵⁹

Gliddon’s causal nexus between past and present entitled whites to view themselves as part of a continuous unbroken ancestral chain connected with the undeniable power, prestige, and grandness of Egypt. Africans were personified as inferior beings set apart from enlightened humanity, and thereby denying them historical and psychological access to any ancestral identity that could prove otherwise. For Delany, to challenge these hieroglyphic interpretations by Gliddon was to challenge the very stability of the conceptual and political universe of White supremacy.

⁵⁵ Levine, *Martin R. Delany*, 53.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁵⁷ Gliddon, *Ancient Egypt*, 58.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

Conclusion

Robert Young keenly asserts that “*the academic account of Egypt was not simply influenced and changed because of increasing racism and racialism but actually provided the key to the arguments and constituted the proof or racial theory itself.*”⁶⁰ In refuting the arguments posited by Gliddon utilizing Egyptian hieroglyphs, Delany provided an ancestral reference point for the humanity of African people that transcended the racial theories that posited the enduring inferiority of African people since antiquity.

The importance of Delany’s use of Egyptian hieroglyphs in the *Principia of Ethnology* holds a unique position in the whole of the documentation of African-American interest in the study of Ancient Egypt. This text seems to mark a beginning, not of African-American interest and commentary on Ancient Egypt, but of the interpretation and elaboration on Egyptian hieroglyphs which anticipates developments that would become more explicit throughout the 20th c. Indeed, this text to my knowledge may mark the beginning of the first African, at least in the diaspora, to show and comment on Egyptian hieroglyphs post-Champollion’s 1822 discovery.

For Delany, echoes of the ancestral past were reintegrated into present historical understandings and contexts to provide the necessary foundation for the creativity and ingenuity that would “regenerate the African race” in the face of the exponential racist theories and external, oppressive societal forces that daily threatened the lives of African-Americans. Delany’s use of Egyptian hieroglyphs in *Principia of Ethnology* was mapped onto the grid of his prior knowledge and understanding in such a way that it extended the boundaries of his past work and explicitly encoded for the first time hieroglyphic understandings to help point the way toward not only an understanding of the African past, but a more salient political future for African-Americans.

⁶⁰ Stephen Dougherty, “Prophecy, Racial Paranoia, and the Figure of Egypt in Antebellum America,” *Arizona Quarterly*, vol. 56, no. 3 (Autumn 2000), 17.

Appendix I



These two lines of Egyptian hieroglyphs written in Delany's own hand represent the first textual effort by an African-American to transcribe and translate Egyptian hieroglyphs. The above texts are contained in his work *Principia of Ethnology* (1879) in Chapter 10 entitled "Builders of the Pyramids."

Appendix II

ANCIENT EGYPT.

20

He moulds man; in Hebrew, **ADAM**, the first man, meaning both man, and red earth, or clay. Now consult Isaiah lvi, 8. "But now, O Lord, thou art our Father: We are the clay, (in Hebrew **ANAZ**, red earth) and thou our potter; and we are all the work of thy hand."



I subjoin Rosellini's translation.

- May
- thy soul
- attain (come)
- to
- KHNUM**, (one of the forms of AMON, the creator)
- the creator, (the idea denoted by a man building the walls of a city)
- of all
- Mankind, (literally men and women.)
- III

"May thy soul attain to Khnum, the Creator of all mankind."

This alone is a proof of the primitive Egyptian creed of one God, the Creator, (whose divine attributes were classed in triads) of man's possession of a soul, and of its immortality; of a resurrection, and of the hope of such.

Let it stand, for the present, as an insight into the pristine purity of Egyptian belief, in ages prior to Abraham's visit; and let the constant expression of "beloved of a god," "loving the gods," like the Hebrew, "dilectus a domino suo, Samuel," (in the Vulgate), "beloved of his Lord, Samuel" attest the primeval piety of the Jewish family over all contemporary nations, whom we are pleased to condemn as Pagans.

NOTES ON EGYPTIAN OBELISKS.

The term Obelisk is derived from the Latin *obeliscus*, a diminutive of the Greek word *obelos*, meaning literally a spit, to indicate the peculiar form of this species of monument; on the same classical principle, that in our day, we facetiously designate *thun needles*.

With more propriety, though with equal foundation, they have been termed "rays of the sun;" but, as the Egyptians had apparently no such idea, when they placed them before their gigantic edifices, we need not pause to inquire into the reason of the appellation.

They are purely historical monoliths, generally of granite, set by order of a Pharaoh, and placed originally in pairs, in front of large royal or religious buildings, to record in their inscriptions, the name, titles, and dedicatory offerings of the monarch, whose munificence and piety had built, repaired, or otherwise embellished the edifices which these obelisks adorned.

The obelisk, on the cover of this essay, is a copy (with one or two slight inaccuracies) of the one still erect at Heliopolis. It is the most ancient, as well as one of the most beautiful extant, dating about 2070, B. C., in the reign of Osortasen the 1st—of the 18th Diospolitan Dynasty.

It is the sole remaining one of a pair that stood together on the same spot (perhaps the other is there still, under the alluvium,) about 647 years ago, in the time of the Arab historian, Abd-el-Lateef; and confirms the rumors handed down to us by Herodotus and Pliny of the former existence of an obelisk there.

Its height is about sixty-one feet, and its base six and a half. It is a beautiful shaft of red granite from the quarries of Syene, distant six hundred and forty miles from its present site, to which it was covered by Osortasen.



- The Horus,
- [Living of men,]
- Pharaoh,
- SUN OFFERED TO THE WORLD,
- Lord of upper and lower Egypt,
- the living of men,
- Son of the sun;
- OSORTASEN,
- beloved of the spirits in the region of Pene,
- ever living,
- life of mankind,
- resplendent Horus,
- beneficent deity,
- SUN OFFERED TO THE WORLD,
- who has begun the celebration of his two panegyrics (i. e. general assemblies) to him who makes him,
- Vivifier for ever.

That is, dedicated to Phr, the god sun, to whom was dedicated the city, on the ruins of which this obelisk now stands—termed in hieroglyphics, the city of Phr; in Greek, *Heliopolis*, the city of the Sun; in Hebrew, *On* and *Beth-Schemmies*, the "Horns of the Sun;" in Sarcenic Arabic, *ain-es-shees*, fountain of the Sun; and in the *Darig*, or colloquial Arabic of the present day, *Matarejeah*, fresh water, from the purity of its springs.

As an instance of the misconceptions, still prevailing all over the

This is a copy of the exact page from the work of George Gliddon, *Ancient Egypt* (1843) where Delany copied his first line of Egyptian hieroglyphs.

Appendix III

ANCIENT EGYPT.

21



"And his majesty, King Darius, ever living, ordered me to go to Egypt, while his majesty was in Aram;" I. e. Assyria—now called *Roum*, the root of *Armenia*. Same statue—epoch between B. C. 625 and 465—

Idem—page 153.

The subjoined example will afford a good idea of the transition from the *linear hieroglyphical* character into the *hieratic*. It is from the grand "Ritual for the Dead."



"O god, who resident in the habitation of waters, I have arrived as far as thee!"

The following are extracted from the "Antiquities of Egypt," being referred to, with some additional notes.

Western face of the Obelisk of Luxor—Piaçe de la Concorde, Paris—sculptures of Ramses 3rd—Sesostris—B. C. 1550.

G.

Under thy sandals (is) Koa, the barbarian land Kua, (Nigritia) (is) in thy grasp.

"Koa, the barbarian land, is beneath thy sandals; Kua (Nigritia) is within thy grasp." Conquers of Ramses 2nd; depicted in the Hemisphere of Egypt. Koa, or Kua, was an Asiatic country. The phonology is identical with *Romans xvi.*, 20—1 Cor. xv., 25-7. The same analogy to the measured phrases or parallelisms of the Hebrew poetry is equally discernible in the succeeding H and I; as well as in most Egyptian legends: strongly confirmatory of the common Asiatic origin of both nations.

L.

O thou ruler of Egypt, (thou) Sun of "Nifaiat"—Lybia—(literally, the nine bows) shall not be (stand) the impure before thee

"O thou ruler of Egypt, thou sun of Lybia, the impure shall not stand before thee." "Nifaiat" is the plural of *phet*, Coptic, a bow; singularly associated with *Phut*, the son of Ham, whose descendants colonized the "Black-adjured"—countries of the date-palm—or Barbary. The bow reminds us of the Numidian archers.

From a tablet at Abcootimbel, Nubia, addressed to Ramses 3rd by an African prince—B. C. 1550.

This is a copy of the exact page from the work of George Gliddon, *Ancient Egypt* (1843) where Delany copied his second line of Egyptian hieroglyphs.

Appendix IV



DELANY



GLIDDON



OSBURN

Delany copied his Egyptian hieroglyphs from the work of George Gliddon, *Ancient Egypt* (1843). Gliddon, in turn, copied his Egyptian hieroglyphs from the work of William Osburn, *Antiquities of Egypt*. This is a comparative presentation of Egyptian hieroglyphs by Delany, Gliddon, and Osburn.

Appendix V



DELANY



GLIDDON



OSBURN

Delany copied his Egyptian hieroglyphs from the work of George Gliddon, *Ancient Egypt* (1843). Gliddon, in turn, copied his Egyptian hieroglyphs from the work of William Osburn, *Antiquities of Egypt*. This is a comparative presentation of Egyptian hieroglyphs by Delany, Gliddon, and Osburn.

Appendix VI

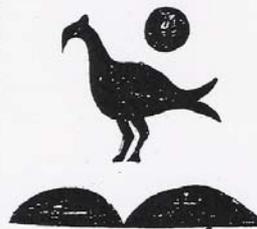
50

THE ORIGIN OF

The figure thus:
son;" which signifies
who was the son of a
of the first inscrip-
column, instead
this:

figure I
that the
son of
indica-
first of

is read, "Son, son of a
a king, the son of a king,
king. But in the case
tion of the Luxor
of that, we have
the same symbol with a unit or
(one) above it, which implies
prince it represents was not the
a prince who ruled in that country,
ting this prince himself to be
his line who ruled. We think
from this it is plain, that the Luxor inscription cannot refer to
Rameses III, as instead of I (one) above the bird which repre-
sents a phoenix, it should have been the disc of the sun:
had it represented the dynastic successor of a ruler. This
important fact must also be re-
membered, that in addition to
the sun-disc over the phoenix,
the symbol of the country over
which he ruled must be placed
under it thus:
showing that he ruled over
that country.



We think that it is plain, instead of the interpretation of
Champollion, that the inscription on the left hand column of the
obelisk of Luxor, now deposited in France, as being in commem-
oration of Rameses III, it is none other than Rameses I. Ham,
or Jupiter Ammon.

This copy of a page from Delany's work illustrates that he observed an essential similarity in Gliddon's work between the writing of this bird  in his first line of Egyptian hieroglyphs and the writing of this same bird as part of the nominal epithet  s3 R^c "son of Ra", an important part of the titulary of the Pharaoh that introduces the name of the Pharaoh before his formal accession to the throne. Ultimately, Delany's faulty reading of the presumed similarities between the birds is an outgrowth of a mistake by Gliddon in transcription.

Appendix VII

32

orb." In the Bible, this name of the kings of Egypt is, in the original Hebrew letters, spelt *Phràh*; rendered *Pharaoh* in our version, and corrupted into the sound of *Fáyray-o*. So strangely has this appropriate title of the monarch of Egypt deviated from its natural sound, and simple application, that at the present day, in Arabic, when one man calls another "*Yà Pharaoh, ebn-Pharaoh,*" "thou Pharaoh, son of a Pharaoh," he fancies that he has heaped upon his head the ne-plus-ultra of opprobrium!

Every Pharaoh was the *sun* of Egypt; and over his name bore "Son of the Sun;" and as the *sun* was *Phrà*, so each king was called *Phrà* in common parlance, as we say *king*. Each monarch by law inherited his father's throne in lineal succession; so that the incumbent was *Phrà*, son of *Phrà*, literally "Sun, son of the Sun;" as in the East, at present, the Ottoman Emperor is termed by the Arabs, *Sooltàn, ebn Sooltàn*, emperor, son of an emperor.

It is essential to observe, that the sun, or god *Phrà*, or *Phré*, was also more frequently written *Ré*, or *Rà*. And, as Wilkinson remarks, *Phré* is merely *Ré*, with the article *Pi* prefixed, pronounced *PIRE*, the Sun, in the Theban dialect, and *Phré* in the Memphitic.

This is a copy of a page from Gliddon's work, *Ancient Egypt* (1843) that depicts the epithet *s3 R^c* "son of Ra." Since this page follows only three pages after the first line of hieroglyphs copied by Delany, he probably looked at this exact page to make his visual comparison of the bird in this epithet with the initial bird contained in his first line of Egyptian hieroglyphs.

□ L'auteur

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