

MUMMY LABEL DATABASE (MLD)

François Gaudard, Raquel Martín Hernández, and Sofía Torallas Tovar

Introduction

The Mummy Label Database is a joint project of the Instituto de Lenguas y Culturas del Mediterráneo y Oriente Próximo, Centro de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales - CSIC, Madrid, and of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. The editors of the present database would like to take this opportunity to thank Gil Stein, Director of the Oriental Institute, for supporting this collaboration. This project is focused on making the already-published mummy labels easily accessible to scholars as an online database. In addition, the aim of the project is to publish as many of the still-unpublished labels as possible, as well as to republish all those that have been defectively or incompletely edited. On April 27, 2009, at the Oriental Institute, we delivered a lecture entitled “Introducing the Mummy Label Database,” in which the aims and guidelines of the project were presented to the University of Chicago scholarly community.

Mummy labels were used as a means of identifying corpses of the deceased when they had to be transported from their home to the necropolis. Made of wood or, more rarely, of stone, faience, or even ivory, they were attached to the mummy with a piece of cord and inscribed in Demotic, Greek, or sometimes both, with short texts giving important information such as the name, parentage, age, place of residence, and destination of the deceased, and sometimes further indications, for example, about the shipping and lading of the corpses. In addition, especially in the Demotic texts, they often included a short formula for the welfare of the deceased in the hereafter, which testifies to their religious function. Mummy labels could even play the role of a cheap substitute for funerary stelae,¹ as indicated in some cases by their shape and the fact that they were identified as *wy.t* or στήλη “stela.”² It is not unusual for mummy labels to include an illustration in addition to the text. One finds, for example, pictures of sacred animals (falcon, recumbent jackal, winged scarab with the sun disk), gods (Anubis taking care of the mummy of the deceased, protector genius, Osiris), religious symbols (knot of Isis flanked by two *djed* pillars), or, more rarely, the deceased himself (see fig. 1), as well as other illustrations whose interpretation can be problematic.

These small monuments represent a very interesting corpus that has often been neglected in the study of the material and documentary evidence from Egypt. There are approximately 2,500 known and edited labels, but since they are published in various periodicals and journals, a thorough study is all the more difficult to begin.

The Mummy Labels in the Oriental Institute Museum

To illustrate our study, we now discuss the mummy labels in the Oriental Institute Museum, which will be included in the database.³ These labels can be sorted into three groups:

Greek Mummy Labels: LI-368 numbers

Sixty-one wooden mummy labels inscribed in Greek were found during the excavation of the Roman-period cemetery at Medinet Habu conducted by the University of Chicago Oriental Institute between 1929 and 1930. From the study of the paleography and onomastics they can be dated to the third and fourth centuries A.D. Only one label can be dated precisely to year 2 of the reign of Probus (A.D. 276–282) and a few are apparently dated to an induction. These sixty-one Greek mummy labels “are significant in being the largest single corpus of mummy labels

from a controlled excavation.” Unfortunately, most of them “do not have precise archaeological context” and “were found amongst the debris of plundered burials.”⁴ A preliminary edition of these labels was published by Terry G. Wilfong.⁵

Demotic Mummy Labels: OIM 25285, 25286, 25287, 25288, 25289⁶

These five stone mummy labels inscribed in Demotic were originally purchased by W. F. Edgerton at Luxor between 1931 and 1933. They were part of the antiquities received by the Oriental Institute Museum from Edgerton’s collection on January 18, 1973, following his death on March 20, 1970. Their provenance is unknown, but several similarities with mummy labels from Dendera make it virtually certain that these stela-shaped labels originate from that town. Specifically, they are made of stone, and their inscriptions are incised and painted. None of these labels is dated, but by comparison with the rare labels from Dendera that do bear a date, it is likely that they are to be attributed to the late first century B.C. or early first century A.D. (reigns of Augustus [30 B.C.–A.D. 14] or Tiberius [A.D. 14–37]).

Bilingual Mummy Label: OIM 19387⁷

This fragmentary limestone mummy label inscribed in Demotic and Greek does not belong to the preceding lot. According to the Oriental Institute Museum registration card, it was collected in the Theban area by Harold Nelson and W. F. Edgerton. However, as suggested by the Oriental Institute Museum Registrar, it is extremely likely that this label was purchased in the Luxor area, between 1929 and 1939, but could have come from elsewhere. Only the left side of the label is preserved, making the reading of the inscription all the more difficult. Paleographically speaking, a date no later than the second century A.D. can be suggested.

Background

So far, one of the most important general studies on mummy labels was written by Jan Quaegebeur,⁸ who contributed greatly to our knowledge about such documents. Quaegebeur offers a tentative typology of the known labels based on their external appearance and sorts them into three basic categories:⁹

Stela Shape

This format is the most common. According to Quaegebeur’s classification, stela-shaped mummy labels can be characterized as having “two corners of the same end … rounded” (figs. 1 and 2) “or cut at an angle” (fig. 3). Usually such labels have a hole drilled in the narrower end, through which the cord attaching the label to the mummy was drawn.



Figure 1. OIM 25289

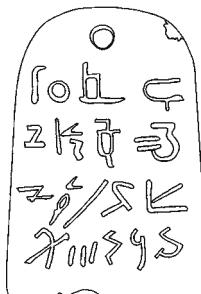


Figure 2. OIM 25285

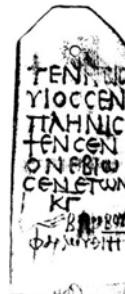


Figure 3. LI-368: 7

Tabula Ansata

This type of tag displays one (fig. 4) or two ears (fig. 5) that could be rounded or pointed. Labels with two pierced ears were “fastened to the mummy and are accordingly as a rule inscribed on only one side.”¹⁰



Figure 4. LI-368: 2



Figure 5. LI-368: 60

Rectangular or Arbitrary Shapes

Figure 6. LI-368: 19



Figure 7. LI-368: 32

In his analysis of the texts inscribed on mummy labels, Quaegebeur covers many relevant points. On the one hand, he studies the practical aspects of the embalming, burial, and the shipping of the mummies, as well as the people involved in the handling of corpses, namely scribes and undertakers. On the other hand, he observes how important the content of these texts is for sociological and sociolinguistic studies: prosopography, genealogy, onomastics (double names), offices, occupations, and the peculiarities of a bilingual population. In addition, he also studies the religious formulae usually inscribed on Demotic mummy labels.

In the section of his study entitled “Future Tasks,” Quaegebeur points out a number of issues:¹¹

- 1) Many labels have been published defectively:
 - a) For example, in the case of bilingual labels, many editors neglected the Demotic inscriptions, focusing only on the Greek texts.

- b) In a large number of cases, photographs and facsimiles of the labels have not been provided.
- 2) Moreover, many labels are still unpublished, especially the Demotic ones. Even small collections should be taken into consideration.
- 3) As Quaegebeur himself notes in his conclusions, his study is preliminary and some aspects still need to be treated in depth. He thinks it would be desirable for a corpus to be compiled.

Progress has been made since Quaegebeur's study. At present we have access to more information about the labels and more texts are known, so that notable improvements can be introduced.

Description and Aims of the Mummy Label Database Project

We intend to create a database as complete as possible which will include a full description of each mummy label in six different sections, as follows:

- 1) The name of the institution where the labels can be found, as well as their inventory numbers. This section is to also include the Trismegistos project number (see <http://www.trismegistos.org/>) and a reference to any other existing catalog.
- 2) Archaeological information: date, provenance, and acquisition data.
- 3–4) The material description and measurements. Note that some editions provide exact measurements, not only of the label itself, but also of the ears, and even indicate the distance between the hole and the margin, etc. In the future, these descriptions can be improved with an autoptical examination of the pieces.
- 5) Textual information including the type of script, language, and ink; the state of preservation and orientation of the text; the text itself (transcription/transliteration, translation), whether written in hieroglyphs, hieratic, Demotic, Coptic, Greek, or Aramaic; and, when necessary, a commentary.
- 6) All bibliographical references and online access to museum collections having a Web site with available photographs of the labels. When possible we will include photographs of the labels on the MLD Web site.

Our first endeavor will be to include all the available edited labels in the database as well as the still-unpublished ones. Then it is our purpose to start further studies, some of them already suggested by Quaegebeur. Among others, we intend to:

- 1) *Complete and improve Quaegebeur's typology.* His three types can be expanded with more details. This should prove to be a very interesting line of research and would be useful since the shape of the labels sometimes indicates the provenance and date, which often cannot be deduced from other criteria. A complete material description will provide the necessary information for a systematic typological study.
- 2) *Revise and complete existing editions, as well as publish still-unpublished labels.*
- 3) *Take advantage of the great amount of information provided by the database to study the life of a bilingual, multicultural, and multiethnic population.* Indeed, mummy labels are invaluable testimonies for such a study by the fact that they are often inscribed with bilingual texts. Necessarily short and formulaic, their primary content is the name of the

MUMMY LABEL DATABASE

deceased, but, as already mentioned above, sometimes they include further information such as the parentage, age, place of residence, destination of the deceased, and even a short prayer to Osiris. Some labels were probably bilingual for practical reasons, such as avoiding problems during transportation. The question whether they were written by the same scribe or by two different ones is still unclear. Sometimes the ductus and the uniformity of writing point to a single scribe. Labels are also the best source of information for the study of double names and how the transcription system worked.¹² Anthroponyms in Greco-Roman Egypt do not always reflect linguistic or ethnic extraction, since names from different origins (Greek, Latin, and Egyptian) often appear in the same family, and also many individuals used double names: an Egyptian one at home and a Greek one in society.

Conclusion

We hope this database will be a useful tool for subsequent studies. We intend to make it available to the scholarly community via the Internet. The database will be fully searchable since all texts will be composed in the Unicode system. Finally, it is our aim to link our database to the Trismegistos project and obtain a fluent interchange of information.

Notes

¹ See, for example, W. Spiegelberg, *Die demotischen Denkmäler 1 (30601–31166), Die demotischen Inschriften*. Catalogue général du Musée du Caire (Leipzig: Drugulin, 1904), p. 3; G. Möller, *Mumienschilder*, Demotische Texte aus den Königlichen Museen zu Berlin 1 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1913), p. 2; H. Bonnet, *Reallexikon der ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1952), p. 479; E. Bresciani “Etichette di mummia in calcare da Dendera nella collezione Michaelidis,” *Studi Classici e Orientali* 10 (1961): 209; J. Quaegebeur, “Mummy Labels: An Orientation,” in *Textes grecs, démotiques et bilingues*, edited by E. Boswinkel and P. W. Pestman, *Papyrologica Lugduno-Batava* 19 (Leiden: Brill, 1978), pp. 237, 251; B. Boyaval “Conclusions provisoires sur les étiquettes de momies en langue grecque,” *Bulletin de l’Institut français d’archéologie orientale* 86 (1986): 39.

² See, for example, Möller, *Mumienschilder*, p. 2; Bresciani “Etichette di mummia,” p. 209 and n. 5; Quaegebeur, “Mummy Labels: An Orientation,” p. 237 and nn. 38–39.

³ We would like to thank Gil Stein, Director of the Oriental Institute, and Geoff Emberling, Director of the Oriental Institute Museum, for giving us permission to publish these labels.

⁴ See T. G. Wilfong, “Mummy Labels from the Oriental Institute’s Excavations at Medinet Habu,” *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 32 (1995): 159.

⁵ See *ibid.*, pp. 157–81.

⁶ These labels have been edited by F. Gaudard and J. H. Johnson in an article entitled “Six Stone Mummy Labels in the Collection of the Oriental Institute Museum,” now in press.

⁷ This label has been edited by F. Gaudard and J. H. Johnson in an article entitled “Six Stone Mummy Labels in the Collection of the Oriental Institute Museum,” now in press.

⁸ See Quaegebeur, “Mummy Labels: An Orientation.” For further general information on mummy labels, see, for example, Möller, *Mumienschilder*, pp. 1–9; J. Quaegebeur, “Mumienetiketten,” in *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* 4 (1982) cols. 216–17; compare also Boyaval, “Conclusions provisoires,” pp. 37–89.

⁹ See Quaegebeur, “Mummy Labels: An Orientation,” pp. 235–36.

¹⁰ See *ibid.*, p. 235.

¹¹ See *ibid.*, pp. 257–59.

¹² See J. Quaegebeur, “The Study of Egyptian Proper Names in Greek Transcription: Problems and Perspectives,” *Onoma* 18 (1974): 403–20.