

## Demotic Dictionary Project

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The last year has seen the staff of the Demotic Dictionary Project turn their attention from the literary and religious texts from which they had begun making vocabulary entries to the enormous bulk of more mundane documents: legal contracts, accounts, private

letters, tax receipts, and lists of various types. All these texts are written in the very cursive script known as demotic; the earliest texts date from the time of the Persian conquest (525–404 B.C.), the latest from the Roman period (into the third century of our era).

During the past year we have finished a collection of letters from the Fayum written by employees of the temple of Sobek or about temple business, including, among other things, bids by private individuals on contracts to undertake various types of work for the temple and complaints by various employees against other employees, including an apparent charge of embezzlement. Other private letters also involve disputes between individuals, often involving the sale price or the ownership of land. From Elephantine come personal letters suggesting that the addressee approach an oracle to seek answers to questions such as which of two women to marry. Slightly different are the letters addressed to the god Thoth, asking him to intervene on behalf of the letter writer in a dispute in which the writer cannot get anyone on earth to redress the wrong.

The so-called Hermopolis Legal Code is actually more a collection of case law than a law code, containing a series of instructions on what to do "If a man sues a man" about a whole range of disputes involving ownership and lease of land. Sample contract formulas are included. The last part of the text outlines inheritance law—if a person dies intestate, all the children inherit equally, but the sons get to pick their shares before the daughters; and the child, usually the eldest son, who bears the burden of funerary expenses gets two shares. A series of contracts outlines the rights and obligations of membership in various cult guilds: all the members help defray the cost of one another's burials, but during a man's life his fellow guild members must support him if he is wrongfully taken to court, they must loan him money if he is broke (unless they swear an oath that they, too, are broke), and they must take him out and get him drunk and console him over the death of any young son or daughter. Very numerous are the actual sales contracts, quitclaim deeds, leases, and marriage contracts, then as now largely full of legal formulas. Occasionally enough are preserved pertaining to the same family or same plot of land that something of the social milieu from which they derive can be seen. This year we have worked on two such archives, one from Thebes, the other from the Fayum. Also exceedingly numerous are the ostraca, an-

cient Egyptian scrap "paper," used to jot notes, lists, accounts, receipts (including tax receipts), or even bits of literary or historical texts. We are currently working our way through the more than 600 ostraca in the Leiden museum.

Because it is extremely difficult to read the demotic script, most texts are published leaving a few lacunas. With the files to assist us, we are often able to suggest readings for some of these problem words. In addition, with our access to so much more comparative material than most individuals publishing texts, we are often able to improve on a published reading. Thus the dictionary files, which record every occurrence of every word in every text which we have studied, mark not only the new words which do not occur in Erichsen's demotic glossary (published in 1954) to which we are producing a supplement, but also all the words for which we have suggested a reading or a change in reading or translation.

Statistics can be very misleading but, as a suggestion of the scope of the dictionary project, it can be noted that for the letter *aleph*, the first letter of the alphabet, Erichsen's glossary has 80 words; we now have 68 new words in our files and we have improved on the reading of another 15 instances. Sample dictionary pages were composed in the last year to begin working out the problems of content and format. At the time those sample pages were compiled, we had 34 new words beginning with the letter *b*, in addition to the 75 which appear in Erichsen's glossary. We now have 70 such new words. For the letter *p*, we had 31 new entries, compared to the 61 in Erichsen's glossary; we now have 100 such new entries. In addition, we have been able to suggest a reading or improve on a reading or translation of 40 instances of words beginning with *b* and 65 of words beginning with *p*. Thus, we now anticipate that our supplement to Erichsen's glossary will be approximately the same size as that volume and that our dictionary files will remain a major source of information on new words and old alike for many years to come.

The extensive work accomplished during the year is due to the consistent hard work of the dictionary staff: George R. Hughes, Professor Emeritus of Egyptology, who gives constantly and generously of his time and knowledge; Robert Ritner (Senior Research Assistant), Michael FitzPatrick and Richard Jasnow (Research Assistants), and Charles Hadala and Lisa Moore. We were, of course, sorry to lose the services of Mark Smith, who accepted a teaching appointment at Oxford University, but we look forward to his continued association with the project as a consultant.