

The Demotic Dictionary Project

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Demotic is, as regular readers of the Annual Report know, a late stage of the Egyptian language. By the middle of the first millennium B.C., the ancient Egyptians were writing personal letters, business and legal doc-



uments, tax receipts, literary texts and many other kinds of documents in this very cursive script. Ultimately derived from hieroglyphs, it bore as much resemblance to that original pictorial script as shorthand does to printing. Hieroglyphs, being

both slow and hard to draw (especially for those of us who are not very artistically inclined), were reserved for formal inscriptions, especially texts and scenes decorating the walls of the temples. Both scripts (hieroglyphic and Demotic) could sometimes be used in the same inscription: The Rosetta Stone (which was the key to the decipherment of the hieroglyphs) contains an inscription commemorating the many beneficial deeds which one of the Hellenistic kings did for the major temples of Egypt; since the stelae on which this inscription was carved were to be set up in the major temples throughout the land, the text was carved in hieroglyphs, but since very few people could read hieroglyphs, the text was also written in both Demotic and Greek.

A five-volume dictionary of the hieroglyphic stages of the Egyptian language and script was compiled in Berlin through the efforts of many of the major Egyptologists of the early twentieth century; supplementary studies of Egyptian vocabulary appear regularly. For Demotic, which is much more difficult to read because it is so much more cursive, there was no good dictionary until Wolja Erichsen published his own personal files in the form of the *Demotisches Glossar* in 1954. Since that date, several extremely long and important literary and scientific texts have been published which contain much vocabulary which had not been attested earlier and which is not, therefore, in Erichsen's *Glossar*. The Demotic Dictionary Project was founded ten years ago to prepare a supplement to Erichsen, giving all the new vocabulary which occurred in texts published after

1954 and also giving any newly attested meanings of older known words.

With this purpose in mind, we began by collecting all the vocabulary from every Demotic text which was published during the 25-year period from 1955 through 1979. We then went through all this vocabulary, identifying the new words or new meanings which should be included in the supplement and then began writing the actual supplement itself. We have now completed the first draft of this supplement, a manuscript over 950 pages long. For each entry we are giving not only the suggested meaning of the word but its relation to words known from other stages of Egyptian, its use in various idioms and compounds, and a facsimile of the actual example or examples of the word. If there has been discussion of the word or its meaning by the original editor of a text or by other scholars, the conclusions are summarized and the reference included, so that the user of the supplement will be able to check for himself the accuracy of such suggestions.

Preparing this manuscript has required us to work out a format for the presentation of the various pieces of information in a manner which will make it as easy as possible for scholars from various fields (Demotists and other Egyptologists, Greek scholars, historians of law, medicine, etc.) to find and use the information. Since for many of these scholars English is not their native language, we need to make things as clear as possible without using too many abbreviations, etc., but also without wasting space and

increasing the size (and cost) of the volume. We began with an outline of the format we desired; however, over the years that we have been writing entries, it became clear that our original way of handling certain small points was not necessarily the best. And, because there were several different people writing first draft material, not everyone handled "special cases" (needless to say, it seems as if every other entry is a "special case") or unanticipated questions the same way. Thus, one of the major tasks which we face is going back over these 950 pages and coordinating the format, making sure that the same conventions are used in the first letters of the "alphabet" as in the last ones.

A much more important task remaining to be done is the checking of every piece of information in every entry. Each time a reference is made to a text or to a discussion or to a related word in another stage of Egyptian or in another ancient Near Eastern language, that reference must be checked to be sure that we have not made a typo or misinterpreted what the original author said. I liken this kind of work to proof-reading the phone book: much of it is dull and boring, but it is absolutely essential that the information provided be correct. Fortunately, since the manuscript has been prepared using an Apple Macintosh computer (for which we use

specially designed hieroglyphic, Coptic, Greek, and Hebrew fonts and a font with all the diacritics necessary for transliterating those languages), the corrections of format and proof-reading are much easier to incorporate than in a typewritten manuscript.

The other major task which remains is the preparation of hand copies of the thousands of Demotic words which are included in the supplement. A beginning was made this summer in preparing these copies, but it will be a slow and painstaking job to make the accurate copies which will be necessary in the vast majority of cases where a mechanical reproduction (e.g., Xerox or the original published photograph) cannot provide the needed clarity.

During the past year the core of the Dictionary staff has remained Robert Ritner, Associate Editor, George Hughes, Professor Emeritus of Egyptology and lynchpin of the staff, Joseph Manning, Edward Walker, and myself. We unfortunately lost the services of Lisa Moore during the course of the year and we miss her contributions greatly. We profited greatly from the two months which Richard Jasnow spent in Chicago during the summer on leave from his duties in Würzburg, West Germany.