

DEMOTIC DICTIONARY PROJECT

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A couple of years ago the report on the Demotic Dictionary Project highlighted our knowledge of the animals familiar to the Egyptians who lived and wrote during the millennium from the 7th century B.C. until the 3rd century A.D. This was the time when Demotic was the standard script used by residents in Egypt who wished to write in the Egyptian language; many Greek immigrants and their descendants wrote in Greek, which was also the language used for most formal government administrative records. We have been collecting the vocabulary found in such Demotic texts (both literary and non-literary) and studying its relation to the vocabulary found in earlier "classical" Egyptian texts and in later Coptic texts. "Coptic" is the name not only of the latest stage of the Egyptian language, written in Greek letters, but also of the Christian church in Egypt, which still flourishes today; it is from the latter that the term "Coptic" is used to describe that period of Egypt's history which corresponds to the Byzantine period. From our studies, we have deepened our understanding of such diverse aspects of Egyptian culture as the legal system, the concept of the "hero" in fiction, and the pervasiveness of taxes in almost every aspect of life (including death).

One of the texts which has provided a wealth of new words, and new appreciation of the extent of Egyptian scientific knowledge, is a medical text, dated approximately to the 3rd century of the modern era. Its compilation was due to the work of learned men associated with temples in the Fayum. Egypt has a long and very rich tradition of accomplishment in medical matters. Several important medical texts, including the famous Edwin Smith surgical papyrus (detailing various types of injuries to the head and upper torso with which a surgeon might have to deal and remarkable for its "modern" clinical, non-emotional approach to the problems presented), are known

from the Middle and New Kingdoms. Greek writers on medicine and medication claimed an Egyptian origin for many of their ingredients and prescriptions, partly, perhaps, because of the traditional Greek view of Egypt as the source of knowledge and wisdom. But until this major Demotic text was published, we had little direct evidence for the range and quality of Egyptian medicine contemporary with the Greek. The Demotic text is basically a series of prescriptions for medications (salves, potions, etc.) which will cure various ailments.

One of the more interesting aspects of this long text is the information it provides about the medical use of a range of both common and rare plants and animal products. The text is very badly broken, but a couple of sample passages give its flavor.

Another (prescription to) stop a cough: Cook the ingredients also [as in the preceding prescription]: Myrrh . . . [measured] exactly, pepper, 10 parts of grain, terebinth, 3/4 part bitter vetch (Greek "orobion"), iris, . . . (4/11-12)

Another (prescription for) drying up putrefaction in the ear: Cheap wine and heated copper. Grind and administer Another: . . . , tar, honey, red orpiment. Grind and administer to it. A bandage of linen boiled in water is made for every illness of the ear. (4/25-27)

Remedy for skin blotches: 1 dry measure of cress, 1 dry measure of mustard, 3 parts "rocket" plant (a type of cabbage), . . . (15/4-5)

The healing action of such products as honey and copper, or a sterilized bandage, is known (for an interesting history of ancient medicine, see Guido Majno, *The Healing Hand*).

Many of these products are also mentioned in non-medical texts, sometimes in leases in which the lessee agrees to raise a particular product on the land he is leasing, sometimes in tax receipts, where different rates of tax are paid on different agricultural products. Some of the crops which we think of as typically Egyptian (cotton, sugar cane) are not present (sugar cane was introduced after the Arab invasion; cotton became common only during the middle ages), but others are frequently mentioned (wheat, figs, dates from palm trees, papyrus). The range of herbs, spices, and "condiments" mentioned suggests that Egyptian cooking was far from bland and boring (e.g., dill, sesame, garlic, fennel, cardamum, cumin, fenugreek, mustard, and, perhaps,

anise, and rosemary). As a supplement to the staples of bread and vegetables (e.g., various types of beans, lentils, cucumber, onions), the Egyptians had had both wine and beer from early in recorded history (if not before). They had several varieties of oil—for cooking, for anointing the body and for burning in lamps. Although most of the plants and other food products mentioned in Demotic texts were probably grown in Egypt itself, some, at least, were imported; for example, spices such as pepper came from South India (a peppercorn was actually found in an archaeological context during the Oriental Institute's excavations at the Roman and medieval port site of Quseir al-Qadim, on the Red Sea coast) while high grade olive oil came from Palestine.

Unfortunately, many of the names of plants and foods which occur in Demotic texts occur infrequently, in contexts which do not make their identification clear. Thus, one of the jobs of the Demotic Dictionary Project has been to attempt to identify ancestors or descendants within Egyptian or related words in other ancient languages (especially Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek) so that we may suggest a meaning or translation of the word. We have called on the services of a specialist in the history of medicine for help with the plant (and animal) names which occur in the medical text. Although we have benefitted from the extensive work done on Coptic etymology (the study of the derivation of words and their relationship to words in other languages) in this task, many words remain identified only as "a type of plant." It is frequently the "plant-determinative" written by the ancient scribe at the end of the word which allows us to identify the word as a plant of some sort; we hope that, as more texts are studied, fresh examples of these words will appear which will make further, more precise identifications possible.

Although new texts are being published each year, and although we try to keep our files up-to-date, the prime activity of the Demotic Dictionary Project staff this year has been to finish writing the first draft of the entries in our Supplement to the *Demotisches Glossar* published in 1954 by W. Erichsen and to begin the double-checking of all the information contained therein. Since the first draft for each letter has been written by one senior member of the Dictionary staff, a different senior member checks every word for content (all the cards in the file are re-examined by the "second reader" to make sure that both agree on the

meaning and usage of the words), for clarity of expression and presentation, and for accuracy of page references and the like.

Our staff is small. The only senior staff are myself and Robert Ritner, associate editor. George Hughes, with his extensive and intensive knowledge of Demotic texts and his acute understanding of what one can and can not do with a broken and damaged text, remains an invaluable source of information and a calming hand to keep us from making suggestions which we can't fully substantiate. Joe Manning and John Darnell provide invaluable leg-work and are preparing an appendix which will provide users of the Supplement with the publication information on every text from which a word is cited in the Supplement. In addition, this appendix will give an approximate date for the text (when within the 1000-year span of the use of Demotic the text was written) and an approximate provenience (where within the expanse of Egypt it was written). Perhaps just as importantly, the appendix will indicate the reliability of these attributions: Does the text state that it was written in a specific city or was it found in an archaeological context? Was it dated to a specific year of a named king or is the date derived from an analysis of the style of handwriting? We are also benefitting greatly from the proof-reading of Sally Zimmerman, who is checking the semi-completed draft for consistency in style and helping transfer information on date of composition of texts from the appendix to the individual citations.

Thus, although we make progress only slowly, we are making good progress—two letters ⲓ , the 1st letter of the alphabet, and ⲛ , the last letter) are completely checked (they still await facsimiles of the Demotic, which will be included for every word cited in the Supplement) and work is in progress on two more letters. Although one of the frustrations with work on a Supplement such as this is the number of words for which we can not specify an exact meaning, one of the challenges is analyzing the examples of a word carefully enough so that we can identify various nuances of the same word. For example, the verb *ph* might be used either transitively (with a direct object) to mean “to reach” (a place) or intransitively (without a direct object) to mean “to arrive,” often with a preposition “to arrive at” (a place). But in speaking of inheritance, the Egyptian might say the inherited property “reached” the heir, i.e., the heir

inherited the property. When used intransitively, the same verb might also mean not merely “to arrive” but “to come to fruition,” i.e., “to succeed,” or “to be appropriate.” Similarly, the compound noun *ṭ yʿr*, which meant literally “crossing (the) river,” might mean a “journey” or “voyage” in general; it might mean “ferry-service;” and by extension it might refer to a “ferry boat” or to a “ferry tax.” As the reader can see, one of the pleasures of work on the Supplement is that, to paraphrase a comment about reading Webster’s *Dictionary*, the topic keeps changing.