

DEMOTIC DICTIONARY PROJECT

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When people think of ancient Egypt, they tend to think of temples and tombs decorated with hieroglyphs and of rich and powerful rulers controlling all aspects of the lives of their subjects. Since the draft manuscript that I have been checking this year included the letter *P*, and since the letter *P* includes a word for king, I thought it might be interesting to think about the phrases and titles of officials that include this word for king. But first a short digression on the word itself. The normal word used in Demotic texts for “king” is *Pr-ʿ* (pronounced “per‘o” or something similar), the source for our word pharaoh. The Egyptian term means, literally, “great house,” and was originally used of the king’s palace. It soon came to be used to refer to the king himself, much as the term “White House” can be used to refer to the President of the United States. Once the term came to mean “king” rather than “palace,” a new term was developed for palace: *pr Pr-ʿ*, i.e., “house of pharaoh.”

The “house of pharaoh” was the place where many important government officials (*shn.w Pr-ʿ*) worked. Some officials included the word *Pr-ʿ* in their titles, where the term seems to correspond to the adjective “royal”; e.g., “royal agent (*rt*),” (a person who, among other things, “inspects ... the temples” on behalf of the central government) or “royal account scribe” and “royal audit scribe.” The seemingly more general title “royal scribe” corresponds to the Greek title βασιλικὸς γραμματεὺς, officials who are known to have had charge of the financial affairs of individual nomes. The title “royal farmer” indicated a farmer working state-owned land; there was some status involved in being a “royal” farmer and the state provided such farmers with special protection (against, e.g., impressment by corrupt local officials) in order to ensure that the farmers were available

for the actual working of the land. The “house of pharaoh” or “estate of pharaoh” (the word *pr* frequently has this broader meaning) was thus a potential source of wealth or income for private individuals—both officials employed by the state and private individuals renting or leasing the state’s resources. Indeed, a private individual, when called upon to list potential sources of income, included “field, temple, town, (or) palace.”

When an object which can be possessed is qualified as “of pharaoh,” the term usually seems to correspond to our concept of “state” ownership: “state (owned) fields” (both *ḥ* and *sh.t*), “state (owned) wheat,” “state tax” (i.e., taxes payable to the state in money), and “harvest (tax) of (i.e., due to) pharaoh.” But occasionally the term is indicating not possession but quality: e.g., the term “royal linen” indicates linen “fit for” the king.

Some words give indications of state actions and responsibilities: “royal road (*myr*) (a major public thoroughfare)” or “royal street (*hr*),” “oath (in the name) of Pharaoh,” “royal chancellery,” “royal treasury,” “royal granary/granaries” (to which taxes in kind owed the state were paid), “bank of pharaoh” (to which taxes in money were paid), and “royal auction.” Such auctions were very similar to modern government auctions of private land confiscated for nonpayment of taxes. Since the state wanted the land to be under cultivation, and thus producing taxes, it would confiscate abandoned land and auction it to the highest bidder. Privately owned land was normally kept in the family for generation after generation and only rarely put up for sale; thus, a person wishing to acquire land might find the “royal auction” the best way to do so. Both the state and the new owner benefited.

Using any one focus to look at Egypt (or at any other ancient or modern civilization) produces a distorted view, and this list of titles and other phrases including the term *Pr-ḥ* should serve only as an entertaining tantalizer hinting at the riches found in Demotic texts. But I hope it also suggests the range and variety of topics one encounters when writing a dictionary and why working on a dictionary project actually can be a lot of fun. The people having fun this year have included John Nolan, Thomas Dousa, and Alex O’Brien; they were involved in checking first drafts of letter files, in updating our appendix giving information about every text we cite in the dictionary, in incorporating Greek and Aramaic parallels (both vocabulary borrowed into Demotic from these two languages and geographical names which occur in both Demotic and, especially, Greek), and straightening out our extensive card files so that we, and our occasional and very welcome visitors, can find the information sought quickly.

I had the opportunity of giving a status report on the Demotic Dictionary at the Sixth International Congress of Demotists in Pisa in August. Everyone asks the same question I do—when will it be done? I wish I could give a firm (and close) answer! One demonstration at the meetings that I found especially interesting was the computerization of the Pisa collection of Demotic ostraca which several of the Italian students have undertaken, especially Sergio Volpi and Sonia Sanseverino. They have put together a “database” including all information about each of the hundreds of ostraca in the University of Pisa collection, including transliterations and translations of every text and a scan of each ostrakon. The database allows researchers to search quickly to determine whether a given individual, object, vocabulary item, etc., is mentioned in more than one ostrakon; this in turn allows for more efficient study and analysis of the ostraca and their implications. I was, of course, delighted to see that they were including scans of every ostrakon, and I

was even more delighted when they offered to give the Demotic Dictionary a copy of all of their scans. These arrived in the fall, were “translated” from an IBM-PC format to Apple Macintosh format by John Sanders, Head of the Oriental Institute’s Computer Laboratory, and I have already begun incorporating the Pisa scans into the dictionary. This generosity will save the Demotic Dictionary the large amount of time that it would have taken us to scan these hundreds of ostraca; even more importantly, it provides us scans from the original photographic negatives, rather than the lesser quality photographs that appeared in the various publications of these ostraca. This is a great boon for the dictionary and we are very appreciative of the work and generosity of the Italians.
